Insights into Islamic Esoterism & Taoism

René Guénon

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COLLECTED WORKS OF RENÉ GUÉNON

INSIGHTS INTO ISLAMIC ESOTERISM AND TAOISM

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The past century has witnessed an erosion of earlier cultural values as well as a blurring of the distinctive characteristics of the world's traditional civilizations, giving rise to philosophic and moral relativism, multiculturalism, and dangerous fundamentalist reactions. As early as the 1920s, the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951) had diagnosed these tendencies and presented what he believed to be the only possible reconciliation of the legitimate, although apparently conflicting, demands of outward religious forms, 'exoterisms', with their essential core, 'esoterism'. His works are characterized by a foundational critique of the modern world coupled with a call for intellectual reform; a renewed examination of metaphysics, the traditional sciences, and symbolism, with special reference to the ultimate unanimity of all spiritual traditions; and finally, a call to the work of spiritual realization. Despite their wide influence, translation of Guénon's works into English has so far been piecemeal. The *Sophia Perennis* edition is intended to fill the urgent need to present them in a more authoritative and systematic form. A complete list of Guénon's works, given in the order of their original publication in French, follows this note.

This small volume brings together a number of Guénon's early articles relating to Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), or Islamic esoterism. A later article, 'Islamic Esoterism', has also been included, since it articulates so well the particularities of initiation in Islam by defining the fundamental elements of *taṣawwuf*: *sharī'ah*, *ṭariqah*, *ḥaqīqah*. The first constitutes the necessary fundamental exoteric basis; the second, the Way and its means; the third, the goal or final result. In the other chapters, Guénon expresses with his usual synthetic clarity what *tawhīd* and *faqr* are, and gives examples of traditional sciences, relating angelology to the Arabic alphabet, and chirology to the science of letters (*'ilm al-hūrūf*). A number of book and article reviews give further insights into Islamic cosmology. Some may feel that the

essay 'Taoism and Confucianism' here included has little relevance to Sufism and Islam. However, such writers as Toshihiko Izutsu and Sachiko Murata have drawn many parallels between the two traditions. Confucianism, concentrating on social and interpersonal norms, functions as a kind of *sharī'ah* in the context of Chinese religion, while Taoism, like Sufism, is precisely the esoteric Way.

The text consists of articles published posthumously in 1973. The sources of the original French articles are as follows: chap. 1, *Cahiers du Sud*, 1947, pp153–154; chap. 2, *Le Voile d'Isis*, March 1931, pp145–150; chap. 3, *Le Voile d'Isis*, July 1930, pp512–516; chap. 4, *Le Voile d'Isis*, October 1930, pp714–721; chap. 5, *Études Traditionnelles*, VIII–IX, 1938, pp287–291; chap. 6, *Études Traditionnelles*, VIII–IX, 1938, pp324–327; chap. 7, *Le Voile d'Isis*, May 1932, pp289–295; chap. 8, *Études Traditionnelles*, XII–1950, pp337–344, article translated from the Arabic original published in the periodical *El Marifah*; chap. 9, *Études Traditionnelles*, X–1937, pp325–333; chap. 10, *Le Voile d'Isis*, August–September 1932, pp485–508.

Guénon often uses words or expressions set off in 'scare quotes'. To avoid clutter, single quotation marks have been used throughout. As for transliterations, Guénon was more concerned with phonetic fidelity than academic usage. The system adopted here reflects the views of scholars familiar both with the languages and Guénon's writings. Brackets indicate editorial insertions, or, within citations, Guénon's additions. Wherever possible, references have been updated, and English editions substituted.

The present translation is based on the work of Henry Fohr, edited by his son Samuel Fohr. The entire text was checked for accuracy and further revised by Marie Hansen. For help with selected chapters and proofreading thanks go to John Champoux, John Ahmed Herlihy, Ali Lakhani, and Rob Baker, who died before publication. A special debt of thanks goes also to Tony Brown, who died shortly after typing the entire manuscript, and to Cecil Bethell, who revised and proofread the text at several stages and provided the index.

THE WORKS OF RENÉ GUÉNON

Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines (1921)

Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion (1921)

The Spiritist Fallacy (1923)

East and West (1924)

Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta (1925)

The Esoterism of Dante (1925)

The Crisis of the Modern World (1927)

The King of the World (1927)

Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power (1929)

The Symbolism of the Cross (1931)

The Multiple States of the Being (1932)

The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times (1945)

Perspectives on Initiation (1946)

The Great Triad (1946)

The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus (1946)

Initiation and Spiritual Realization (1952)

Insights into Christian Esoterism (1954)

Symbols of Sacred Science (1962)

Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage (1964)

Studies in Hinduism (1966)

Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles (1970)

Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism (1973)

Reviews (1973)

Miscellanea (1976)

FOREWORD

'In Islam,' Guénon wrote, 'tradition is of a double essence: religious and metaphysical. The religious side of the doctrine, which is most outward and is within reach of everyone, can be qualified quite precisely as exoteric, and the metaphysical, which constitutes its deeper meaning and, furthermore, is regarded as the doctrine of the elite, as esoteric. This distinction indeed conserves its proper meaning, since these are two faces of one and the same doctrine.'

It is fitting to add that for Guénon, esoterism is always and everywhere the same, whatever name is given it according to the variety and diversity of countries and traditions. If true knowledge of ultimate Reality is the final object of esoteric inquiry, the methods utilized, although often analogous, are not necessarily identical; they may vary just as languages or individuals vary. 'The diversity of methods,' Guénon wrote to us on October 3, 1943, 'corresponds to the very diversity of individual natures for which they were made; there is a multiplicity of ways all leading to a unique goal.'

In this small volume we have brought together a number of early articles relating to Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), that is, Islamic esoterism. These can be supplemented by passages which relate to this subject in Guénon's other writings, notably in *The Symbolism of the Cross*, as well as by two articles which are reprinted in *Symbols of Sacred Science*: 'The Mysteries of the Letter *Nūn*' and 'The Sword of Islam (*Sayf al-Islām*)'.

We have selected as opening chapter the article on Islamic esoterism which appeared in *Cahiers du Sud*, although it was published later than the others, for it is this article that best articulates the particularities of initiation in Islam by defining the fundamental elements of *taṣawwuf*: *sharī'ah, ṭarīqah, ḥaqīqah*. The first constitutes the necessary fundamental exoteric basis; the second, the Way and its means; the third, the goal or final result. In the other chapters, Guénon expresses with his usual synthetic clarity what *tawḥīd* and

faqr are, and gives examples of traditional sciences, relating angelology to the Arabic alphabet, and chirology to the science of letters (*'ilm al-hūrūf*).

Guénon wrote at length about what he calls 'counter-initiation' and 'pseudo-initiation', especially in *Perspectives on Initiation, The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, and *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*. Arab writers have also treated this question in their discussions of *awliyā ash-shaytān* and 'false Sufis', who, as one of them said, are 'like wolves among men.'

Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Holwāni once asked al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj what he thought of esoteric teaching (*madhab al-bātin*). Al-Ḥallāj responded:

> Of which do you wish to speak, the true or the false [*bātin al-bātil aw bātin al-Ḥaqq*]? If it is a question of true esoterism, the exoterism [*sharī'ah*] is its exterior aspect and whoever follows it truly discovers its interior aspect, which is none other than the knowledge of Allah [*ma'rifah bi'llāh*]; as for false esoterism, its exterior and interior aspects are both equally horrible and detestable. Therefore hold yourself aloof from it.

Guénon likewise said:

> Whoever makes himself out to be a spiritual teacher without attaching himself to a specific traditional form, or without conforming to the rules established by the latter, cannot truly possess the qualifications he appropriates to himself; according to the case, he may be either a common imposter or a 'deluded' person ignorant of the real conditions of initiation, and in this last case even more than in the other it is greatly to be feared that he is only too often nothing more than an instrument in the service of something that he himself may not suspect.[1]

The last chapter is devoted to Taoism and Confucianism, and shows that the difference between esoterism and exoterism is found equally in the non-religious forms of Tradition. This is normal,

1. 'True and False Spiritual Teachers', *Initiation and Spiritual Realization*, chap. 21. Ed.

since it is a question of difference in nature—and even of profound nature—in rites as well as in perspective. This article was written a great deal earlier than *The Great Triad,* the last book Guénon published in his lifetime and the one in which he speaks most of Chinese civilization, but it contains some final thoughts that are not without interest. For example, Guénon states that whatever cyclic conditions might lead to the more or less complete disappearance of the outward aspect of Chinese tradition, its esoteric aspect (Taoism) could never die because in its essential nature it is eternal, that is, beyond temporal conditions.

As we have done previously for the posthumous compilations that we have presented to readers over the past few years (*Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage, Studies in Hinduism, Traditional Forms and Cosmic Cycles*) as well as for the new edition of *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion,* we have added some book and article reviews in which Guénon gives interesting insights into traditional orthodoxy.

ROGER MARIDORT

1

ISLAMIC ESOTERISM

Of all traditional doctrines, perhaps Islamic doctrine most clearly distinguishes the two complementary parts, which can be labeled exoterism and esoterism. In Arabic terminology, these are the *sharī'ah*, literally the 'great way', common to all, and the *ḥaqīqah*, literally the 'inward truth', reserved to an elite, not because of some arbitrary decision, but by the very nature of things, since not all men possess the aptitudes or 'qualifications' required to reach knowledge of the truth. To express their respective 'outward' and 'inward' natures, exoterism and esoterism are often compared to the 'shell' (*qishr*) and the 'kernel' (*lubb*), or to the circumference and its center. The *sharī'ah* comprises everything that in Western languages would be called 'religious', and especially the whole of the social and legislative side which, in Islam, is essentially integrated into the religion. It could be said that the *sharī'ah* is first and foremost a rule of action, whereas the *ḥaqīqah* is pure knowledge; but it must be well understood that it is this knowledge that gives even the *sharī'ah* its higher and deeper meaning and its true raison d'être, so that even though not all those participating in the religion are aware of it, the *ḥaqīqah* is nevertheless its true principle, just as the center is the principle of the circumference.

But this is not all, for esoterism comprises not only the *ḥaqīqah*, but also the specific means for reaching it, and taken as a whole, these means are called the *ṭarīqah*, the 'way' or 'path' leading from the *sharī'ah* to the *ḥaqīqah*. If we return to the symbol of the circumference and its center, we can say that the *ṭarīqah* is represented by the radius that runs from the former to the latter. And this leads us to the following: to each point on the circumference there corresponds a radius, and all the radii, which are indefinite in number, terminate in the center. It can thus be said that these radii are so

many *ṭuruq* (plural of *ṭarīqah*) adapted to the beings 'situated' at the different points on the circumference according to the diversity of their individual natures. This is why it is said that 'the ways to God are as numerous as the souls of men' (*at-turuqu ila 'Llāhi ka-nufūsi bani Adam*). Thus the 'ways' are many, and differ all the more among themselves the closer they are to their starting-point on the circumference; but their end is one, as there is only one center and one truth. Strictly speaking, the initial differences are effaced along with 'individuality' itself (*al-innīya*, from *ana*, 'I'); in other words, when the higher states of the being have been attained, and when the attributes (*sifāt*) of the creature (*'abd*, 'slave')—which are really limitations—disappear (*al-fanā'*, 'extinction'), leaving only those of Allah (*al-baqā*, 'permanence'), the being becoming identified with the latter [Divine attributes] in his 'personality' or 'essence' (*adh-dhāt*).

Esoterism, considered thus as comprising both *ṭarīqah* and *ḥaqīqah*, namely means and end, is designated in Arabic by the general term *taṣawwuf*, which can only be translated precisely as 'initiation'—a point to which we will return later. Although *taṣawwuf* can be applied to any esoteric and initiatic doctrine, regardless of the traditional form to which it belongs, Westerners have coined the [derivative] term 'Sufism' to designate Islamic esoterism; but, apart from being completely conventional, this term has the unfortunate disadvantage of inevitably suggesting by its 'ism' suffix, the idea of a doctrine proper to a particular school, whereas this is not the case in reality, the only schools in question being the *ṭuruq*, which basically represent different methods, without there being any possibility of a fundamental difference of doctrine, for 'the doctrine of Unity is unique' (*at-tawḥīdu wāhid*). As for the derivation of the terms *taṣawwuf* and 'Sufism', they obviously come from the word *sūfī*, and here it must first be said that no one can ever call himself a *sūfī*, except from pure ignorance, for he proves thereby that he is not truly so, this quality necessarily being a secret (*sirr*) between the true *sūfī* and Allah; one can only call oneself a *mutaṣawwuf*, a term applied to anyone who has entered upon the initiatic 'way', whatever the 'degree' he may have reached; but the *sūfī*, in the true sense of the term, is only the one who has reached the supreme degree.

Some have sought to assign the most diverse origins to the Arabic word *sūfī*; but this question is undoubtedly unsolvable from our present position, and we freely admit that the word has too many proposed etymologies, of equal plausibility, for only one to be true; in reality, we must rather see herein a purely symbolic name, a sort of 'cipher', which, as such, requires no linguistic derivation strictly speaking; and this is not unique, for one can find comparable cases in other traditions. As for the so-called etymologies, these are basically only phonetic resemblances, which, moreover, according to the laws of a certain symbolism, effectively correspond to relationships between various ideas which have come to be grouped more or less as accessories around the word in question. But given the character of the Arabic language (a character which it shares with Hebrew), the primary and fundamental meaning of a word is to be found in the numerical values of the letters; and in fact, what is particularly remarkable is that the sum of the numerical values of the letters which form the word *sūfī* has the same number as *al-Hikmatu'l-ilahiya*, 'Divine Wisdom'. The true *sūfī* is therefore the one who possesses this Wisdom, or, in other words, he is *al-'ārif bi' Llah*, that is to say 'he who knows through God', for God cannot be known except by Himself; and this is the supreme or 'total' degree of knowledge or *ḥaqīqah*.[1]

1. In a work on *taṣawwuf*, written in Arabic, but from a very modern perspective, a Syrian writer so ill acquainted with us as to mistake us for an 'orientalist', has taken it into his head to address a rather singular reproach to us: having somehow read *al-Sūfiah* in place of *Sūfī* (in a special issue of *Cahiers du Sud* in 1935 on 'Islam and the West'), he imagined that my calculation was inexact; wishing then to make the calculation himself according to his own lights, he managed, by way of several errors in the numeric value of the letters, to arrive (this time as equivalent to *al-Sūfī*, which is still wrong) at *al-hakīm al-ilahī*, without, moreover, perceiving that, one *ya* being equal to two *ha*'s, these words form exactly the same total as *al-hakmah al-ilahiya*! We know well enough that academic teaching of the present day is ignorant of the *abjad* [the alphabet], and is only familiar with the simple grammatical order of the letters; but just the same, when someone undertakes to treat these questions, such ignorance passes beyond the acceptable limits. Be that as it may, *al-hakīm al-ilahī* and *al-hakmah al-ilahiya* have basically the same meaning; but the first of these two expressions has a somewhat unusual character, while the second, as we have indicated, is, on the contrary, completely traditional.

From the preceding, we can draw several important consequences, the foremost being that 'Sufism' is not something that was 'added' to Islamic doctrine as an afterthought and from outside, but, on the contrary, is an essential part of it, since without it, Islamic doctrine would be manifestly incomplete, and, what is more, incomplete 'from above', that is to say in regard to its very principle. The completely gratuitous supposition of a foreign origin—Greek, Persian, or Indian—is in any case formally contradicted by the fact that the means of expression of Islamic esoterism are intimately linked with the very constitution of the Arabic language; and if there are incontestable similarities with doctrines of the same order existing elsewhere, these can be explained quite naturally and without recourse to hypothetical 'borrowings', for, truth being one, all traditional doctrines are necessarily identical in their essence, whatever the diversity of the forms in which they are clothed. As regards this question of origins, it is of little importance whether the word *sūfī* and its derivatives (*taṣawwuf*, *mutaṣawwuf*) have existed in the language from the beginning or have appeared at some later juncture, this being a great subject for discussion among historians; the thing may well have existed before the word, or under another name, or even without it having been found necessary to give it one. In any case—and this ought to settle the matter for anyone not regarding things merely from the outside—tradition expressly indicates that esoterism, as well as exoterism, proceeds directly from the very teaching of the Prophet, and, in fact, every authentic and regular *ṭarīqah* possesses a *silsilah* or 'chain' of initiatic transmission that ultimately goes back to him through a varying number of intermediaries. Even if, subsequently, some *ṭuruq* really did 'borrow', or, better said, 'adapt', certain details of their particular methods, this has a very secondary importance, and in no way affects what is essential; and here again similarities may equally well be explained by the possession of the same knowledge, especially as regards the 'science of rhythm' in its various branches. The truth is that 'Sufism' is as Arab as the Koran itself, in which it has its direct principles; but in order to find them there, the Koran must be understood and interpreted according to the *haqā'iq* (plural of *ḥaqīqah*) which constitute its deepest meaning, and not simply by

the linguistic, logical, and theological procedures of the *'ulamā az-zāhir* (literally the 'doctors of the outward') or doctors of the *sharī'ah*, whose competence extends only to the exoteric realm. It is a question here of two clearly different domains, and this is why there can never be any contradiction or any real conflict between them; it is moreover obvious that one cannot in any way oppose exoterism and esoterism, since on the contrary the second finds its foundation and point of departure in the first, and since they are really no more than the two aspects or the two faces of one and the same doctrine.

We should also point out that contrary to an opinion only too widespread among Westerners, Islamic esoterism has nothing in common with 'mysticism'. The reasons for this are easy to understand given everything we have explained so far. First of all, mysticism seems to be unique to Christianity, and it is only through erroneous assimilations that one can pretend to find more or less exact equivalents of it elsewhere. Some outward resemblances, in the use of certain expressions for example, are undoubtedly the cause of this error, but they can in no way justify it in light of differences that bear on everything essential. Since by very definition mysticism pertains entirely to the religious domain, it arises purely and simply from exoterism; and furthermore, the end toward which it tends is assuredly far from being of the order of pure knowledge. On the other hand, the mystic could have no method since he has a 'passive' attitude and, as a result, limits himself to receiving what comes to him spontaneously as it were and with no initiative on his part. Thus there cannot be any mystical *ṭarīqah*, and such a thing is even inconceivable, for it is basically contradictory. Moreover, the mystic, always isolated by the very fact of the 'passive' nature of his 'realization', has neither *shaykh* nor 'spiritual master' (who, of course, has absolutely nothing in common with a 'spiritual director' in the religious sense), neither does he have a *silsilah* or 'chain' through which the 'spiritual influence' would have been transmitted to him (we use this expression to render as exactly as possible the meaning of the Arabic word *baraqah*), the second of these two things being moreover an immediate consequence of the first. The regular transmission of the 'spiritual influence' is what essentially

characterizes 'initiation', and even what properly constitutes it, and that is why we have used this word above to translate *taṣawwuf*. Islamic esoterism, like all true esoterism, moreover, is 'initiatic' and cannot be anything else; and even without entering into the question of the difference of goals, which in any case results from the very difference in the two domains to which they refer, we can say that the 'mystical way' and the 'initiatic way' are radically incompatible by reason of their respective characters, and we might also add that in Arabic there is no word by which one can translate 'mysticism' even approximately, so much does the idea expressed thereby represent something completely foreign to the Islamic tradition.

In its essence, initiatic doctrine is purely metaphysical in the true and original meaning of this term; but in Islam, as in other traditional forms, it also includes a complex ensemble of 'traditional sciences' by way of more or less direct applications to various contingent realms. These sciences are as if suspended from the metaphysical principles on which they depend and from which they derive, and draw from this attachment (and from the 'transpositions' which it permits) all their real value; they are thereby an integral part of the doctrine itself, although to a secondary and subordinate degree, and not more or less artificial and superfluous accretions. There seems to be something here that is particularly difficult for Westerners to understand, doubtless because their own environment offers no point of comparison in this regard; nevertheless there were analogous Western sciences in antiquity and the Middle Ages, but these are entirely forgotten by modern men, who ignore the true nature of things and often are not even aware of their existence. Those who confuse esoterism with mysticism are especially prone to misunderstand the role and the place of these sciences, which clearly represent a knowledge as far removed as can be from the preoccupations of the mystics, so that the incorporation of these sciences into 'Sufism' constitutes for them an undecipherable enigma. Such is the science of numbers and of letters, of which we gave an example in the interpretation of the term *sūfī*, and which, in a comparable form, can be found only in the Hebrew *Kabbalah*, by virtue of the close affinity of the languages which are the vehicles of expression for these two traditions, languages of

which only this science can give the most profound understanding. Such are also the various 'cosmological' sciences which are included in part in what is called 'Hermeticism'; and in this connection we must note that alchemy is taken in a 'material' sense only by the ignorant, for whom symbolism is a dead letter, those very people whom the true alchemists of the Middle Ages stigmatized as 'puffers' and 'charcoal burners', and who were the true precursors of modern chemistry, however unflattering such an origin may be for the latter. Likewise astrology, another cosmological science, is in reality something entirely other than the 'divining art' or the 'science of conjecture' which alone is what modern people see in it. Above all it has to do with the knowledge of 'cyclical laws' which play an important role in all traditional doctrines. Moreover, there is a certain correspondence between all these sciences which, since they proceed from essentially the same principles, may be regarded as various representations of one and the same thing from a certain point of view. Thus, astrology, alchemy, and even the science of letters do nothing but translate the same truths into the languages proper to different orders of reality, united among themselves by the law of universal analogy, the foundation of every symbolic correspondence; and, by virtue of this same analogy, these sciences, by an appropriate transposition, find their application in the realm of the 'microcosm' as well as in that of the 'macrocosm', for the initiatic process reproduces in all its phases the cosmological process itself. To have a full awareness of all these correlations, it is necessary to have reached a very high degree in the initiatic hierarchy, a degree which is called that of 'red sulphur' (*al-Kebrīt al-ahmar*); and whoever possesses this degree may, by means of the science known as *sīmiyā* (a word that must not be confused with *kīmiyā*), and by operating certain mutations on letters and numbers, act on the beings and things that correspond to these in the cosmic order. *Jafr*, which according to tradition owes its origin to Seyidna 'Ali himself, is an application of these same sciences to the prevision of future events; and this application, in which the cyclical laws to which we alluded just now naturally intervene, exhibits all the rigor of an exact and mathematical science for those who can understand and interpret it (for it possesses a kind of 'cryptography', which in fact is

no more astonishing than algebraic notation). One could mention many other 'traditional sciences', some of which might seem even stranger to those who are not used to such things; but we must content ourselves with this, and restrict ourselves to generalities, in keeping with the scope of this exposition.

Finally, we must add one last observation of capital importance for understanding the true character of initiatic doctrine: this doctrine has nothing to do with 'erudition' and could never be learned by the reading of books in the manner of ordinary or 'profane' knowledge. The writings of the greatest masters themselves can only serve as 'supports' for meditation; one does not become a *mutaṣawwuf* simply by having read them, and in any case they remain mostly incomprehensible to those who are not 'qualified'. Indeed, it is necessary above all to possess certain innate dispositions or aptitudes which no amount of effort can replace; then, it is necessary to have an attachment to a regular *silsilah*, for the transmission of the 'spiritual influence' that is obtained by this attachment is, as we have already said, the essential condition, failing which there is no initiation, even of the most elementary degree. This transmission, which is acquired once and for all, must be the point of departure of a purely inward work for which all the outward means are no more than aids and supports, albeit necessary, given that one must take the nature of the human being such as it actually is into account; and it is by this inward work alone that a being, if capable of it, will ascend from degree to degree, to the summit of the initiatic hierarchy, to the 'Supreme Identity', the absolutely permanent and unconditioned state beyond the limitations of all contingent and transitory existence, which is the state of the true *sūfī*.

2

THE SHELL AND THE KERNEL (*AL QISHR WA AL-LUBB*)

Al-Qishr wa al-Lubb [The Shell and the Kernel], the title of one of Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī's numerous treatises, expresses in symbolic form the relationship between exoterism and esoterism, likened respectively to the casing of a fruit and to its interior part, the pith or kernel.[1] The casing or shell (*al-qishr*) is the *sharī'ah*, that is, the external religious law which is addressed to all and which is made to be followed by all, as indicated moreover by the meaning of 'great way' that is associated with the derivation of its name. The kernel (*al-lubb*) is the *ḥaqīqah*, that is to say truth or essential reality, which, unlike the *sharī'ah*, is not within reach of everyone but reserved for those who know how to discern it beneath outward appearances and how to attain it through the exterior forms which conceal it, protecting and disguising it at the same time.[2] In another symbolism, *sharī'ah* and *ḥaqīqah* are also designated respectively as the '[outer] body' (*al-jism*) and the 'marrow' (*al-mukh*),[3] of which

1. Let us point out incidentally that this symbol of the fruit has a relationship with the 'cosmic egg', and thus with the heart.

2. One might remark that the role of exterior forms is related to the double meaning of the word 'revelation', since such forms simultaneously manifest and veil the essential doctrine, the one truth, just as a word inevitably does for the thought it expresses; and what is true of a word in this regard is also true of any formal expression.

3. One may recall here the 'substantive marrow' of Rabelais, which also represents an interior and hidden meaning.

the relationship is exactly the same as that of shell and kernel; and one could no doubt find still other symbols equivalent to these.

Whatever the designation used, what is referred to is always the 'outward' (*al-zāhir*) and the 'inward' (*al-bātin*), that is, the apparent and the hidden, which, moreover, are such by their very nature and not owing to any conventions or to precautions taken artificially, if not arbitrarily, by those who preserve traditional doctrine. This 'outward' and this 'inward' are represented by the circumference and its center, which can be looked upon as the cross-section of the fruit evoked by the previous symbol, at the same time that we are brought back to the image, common to all traditions, of the 'wheel of things'. Indeed, if one looks at the two terms in question according to their universal sense and without limiting them by applying them to a particular traditional form, as is most often done, one could say that the *sharī'ah*, the 'great way' traveled by all beings is nothing other than what the Far-Eastern traditions call the 'current of forms', while the *ḥaqīqah*, the one and immutable truth, resides in the 'invariable middle'.[4] In order to pass from one to the other, thus from the circumference to the center, one must follow one of the radii, that is, a *ṭarīqah*, or, one might say, the 'footpath', the narrow way which is followed by very few.[5] Furthermore, there are besides a multitude of *ṭuruq*, which are all radii of the circumference taken in the centripetal sense, since it is a question of leaving the multiplicity of the manifested to move toward principial unity; each *ṭarīqah*, starting from a certain point on the circumference, is particularly adapted to those beings who find themselves at that point, but

4. It is noteworthy that in the Far-Eastern tradition one finds very clear equivalents to these two terms, not as two aspects, exoteric and esoteric, of the same doctrine, but as two separate teachings, at least since the time of Confucius and Lao Tzu. In fact, one might say in all strictness that Confucianism corresponds to the *sharī'ah* and Taoism to the *ḥaqīqah*.

5. The words *sharī'ah* and *ṭarīqah* both contain the idea of 'progressing', and thus of movement (and one should note the symbolism of circular movement for the first term, and linear movement for the second); there is in fact change and multiplicity in both cases, the first having to adapt itself to the diversity of exterior conditions, and the second to that of individual natures; but the being who has effectively attained *ḥaqīqah*, by that very fact participates in its unity and immutability.

whatever their point of departure, they all tend equally toward one unique point,[6] all arrive at the center and thus lead the beings who follow them to the essential simplicity of the 'primordial state'.

The beings who presently find themselves in multiplicity are forced to leave it in order to accomplish any realization whatsoever; but for most of them this multiplicity is at the same time the obstacle that stops them and holds them back; diverse and changing appearances prevent them from seeing true reality, so to speak, as the casing of a fruit prevents one from seeing its inside; and this inside can be attained only by those capable of piercing through the casing, that is, of seeing the Principle through its manifestation, and even of seeing it alone in all things, for manifestation itself, taken all together, is no more than a totality of symbolic expressions. It is easy to apply this to exoterism and esoterism understood in their ordinary sense, that is, as aspects of a traditional doctrine; there also, the exterior forms hide profound truth from the eyes of the common man, whereas on the contrary they may be seen by the elite, for whom what seems an obstacle or a limitation to others becomes instead a support and a means of realization. One must clearly understand that this difference results directly and necessarily from the very nature of the beings, from the possibilities and aptitudes that each carries within itself, so much so that for each of them the exoteric side of the doctrine thus always plays exactly the role that it should, giving to those that cannot go further what it is possible for them to receive in their present state, and at the same time furnishing to those that can go further, 'supports', which, without ever being a strict necessity, since they are contingent, can nonetheless greatly aid them to advance in the interior life, and without which the difficulties would be such that, in certain cases, they would amount to a veritable impossibility.

We should point out in this regard that for the majority of men, that is, for those who inevitably abide by exterior law, this takes on a

6. This convergence is represented by that of the *qiblah* (ritual orientation) of all places toward the *Ka'bah*, which is the 'House of God' (*Bayt Allah*) and of which the form is a cube (the image of stability) occupying the center of a circumference that is the terrestrial (human) cross-section of universal existence.

character which is less a limitation than a guide; it is always a bond, but a bond that prevents them from going astray or from losing themselves; without this law, which obliges them to follow a well-defined path, not only would they never attain the center, but they would risk distancing themselves indefinitely from it, whereas the circular movement keeps them at a more or less constant distance.[7] In this way, those who cannot directly contemplate the light can receive at least a reflection of and a participation in it; and they remain thus bound in some way to the Principle, even though they do not and could not have an effective consciousness of it. Indeed, the circumference could not exist without the center, from which, in reality, it proceeds entirely, and even if the beings who are linked to the circumference do not see the center at all, or even the radii, each of them is nonetheless inevitably situated at the extremity of a radius of which the other extremity is the center itself. But it is here that the shell intervenes and hides whatever is found in the interior, whereas the one who has pierced this shell, by that very fact becoming conscious of the path or radius corresponding to his own position on the circumference, will be liberated from the indefinite rotation of the latter and will only have to follow the radius in order to move toward the center; this radius is the *ṭarīqah* by which, starting from the *sharī'ah*, he will arrive at *ḥaqīqah*. We must make clear, moreover, that once the shell has been penetrated, one finds oneself in the domain of esoterism, this penetration, by its relationship to the shell itself, being a kind of turning about, of which the passage from the exterior to the interior consists. In one sense the designation 'esoterism' belongs even more properly to *ṭarīqah*, for in reality *ḥaqīqah* is beyond the distinction of exoterism and esoterism, as this implies comparison and correlation; the center, of course, appears as the most interior part of all, but when it has been attained there can no longer be a question of exterior or interior, as every contingent distinction then disappears, resolving itself in principial unity.

7. Let us add that this law ought to be regarded normally as an application or a human specification of the cosmic law itself, which similarly links all manifestation to the Principle, as we have explained elsewhere in reference to the significance of the 'laws of Manu' in Hindu doctrine.

That is why Allah, just as He is 'the First and the Last' (*al-Awwal wa al-Akhar*),[8] is also 'the Exterior and the Interior' (*al-Zāhir wa al-Bātin*),[9] for nothing of that which is could be outside of Him, and in Him alone is contained all reality, because He is Himself absolute Reality, and total Truth: *Huwa 'l-Ḥaqq*.

8. That is, the Principle and the End, as in the symbol of the *alpha* and the *omega*.

9. One could also translate this as the 'Evident' (in relationship to manifestation) and the 'Hidden' (in Himself), which correspond again to the two points of view of the *sharī'ah* (the social and religious order) and *ḥaqīqah* (the purely intellectual and metaphysical order), although this latter may also be said to be beyond all points of view, as comprising them all synthetically within itself.

3

AT-TAWḤĪD

The doctrine of Unity, that is, the affirmation that the Principle of all existence is essentially One, is a fundamental point common to all orthodox traditions, and we could even say that it is on this point that their basic identity appears most clearly, conveying itself in its very expression. Indeed, wherever there is Unity, all diversity disappears, and it is only in descending toward multiplicity that differences of form appear, the modes of expression themselves then being as multiple as that to which they refer, and susceptible of indefinite variation in adapting themselves to the circumstances of time and place. But 'the doctrine of Unity is unique' (according to the Arabic formula *at-tawḥīdu wāhidun*), which is to say that it is everywhere and always the same, invariable like the Principle, independent of multiplicity and change, which can only affect applications of a contingent order.

Thus we can say that, contrary to current opinion, nowhere has there ever been any truly 'polytheistic' doctrine, that is, one admitting an absolute and irreducible plurality of principles. This 'pluralism' is possible only as a deviation resulting from the ignorance and incomprehension of the masses, from their tendency to attach themselves exclusively to the multiplicity of the manifested. This is the origin of 'idolatry' in all its forms, born of the confusion of the symbol itself with what it is meant to express, and of the personification of divine attributes considered as so many independent beings, which, in fact, is the only possible origin of 'polytheism'. Moreover, this tendency increases in the measure that one advances in the development of a cycle of manifestation because this development is itself a descent into multiplicity, and because of the spiritual

obscuration that inevitably accompanies it. That is why the most recent traditional forms are those which must express the affirmation of Unity in a manner most visible to the outside; and in fact this affirmation is nowhere expressed so explicitly and with such insistence as in Islam, where, one might say, it even seems to absorb into itself all other affirmations.

The only difference among traditional doctrines in this respect is what we just indicated: the affirmation of Unity is to be found everywhere, but in the beginning it did not even need to be formulated expressly in order to appear as the most evident of all truths, for men were then too near the Principle to fail to recognize it, or to lose sight of it. Today, on the contrary, one could say that most people, engaged almost entirely in multiplicity and having lost the intuitive understanding of truths of a higher order, attain comprehension of Unity only with difficulty; and that is why little by little it has become necessary to formulate this affirmation of Unity over and over again, and more and more clearly—one might even say, more and more energetically—in the course of the history of mankind on earth.

If we consider the present state of things, we see that in a way this affirmation is so hidden in certain traditional forms that at times it even constitutes something like their esoteric side, taking this word in its widest sense, whereas in others it appears quite openly, so much so that sometimes we see it alone; there are assuredly many other things there as well, but they are merely secondary in relation to it. This is the case in Islam, even in its exoteric aspect. Here esoterism does no more than explain and develop everything contained in this affirmation as well as all the consequences deriving from it, and if it does so in terms often identical with those that we find in other traditions, such as the Vedānta and Taoism, this is no cause for astonishment, nor does it have to be seen as the effect of 'borrowings' which are historically questionable; it is so simply because Truth is one, and because, as we said at the beginning, in the principial order Unity of necessity conveys itself in its very expression.

On the other hand, considering things in their present state, it is noteworthy that Western peoples, and more particularly Nordic

peoples, seem to experience the greatest difficulty in understanding the doctrine of Unity, while at the same time they are more engaged than all others in change and multiplicity. These two things obviously go together, and perhaps this is something which at least in part has to do with the conditions of existence of these peoples, a question of temperament, but also a question of climate, one moreover being a function of the other, at least up to a certain point. Indeed, in the countries of the North, where the sunlight is feeble and often dim, one might say that all things appear to be of equal value, so to speak, and in a way which affirms their individual existence pure and simple, without giving any glimpse of something beyond; thus one sees in everyday experience nothing but multiplicity. It is completely otherwise in the countries where the sun by its intense radiation absorbs all things into itself, so to speak, making them disappear before itself just as multiplicity disappears before Unity, not because it ceases to exist according to its own fashion, but because that existence is strictly nothing in face of the Principle. Thus, Unity becomes perceptible as it were; this blazing sun is the image of the lightning-flash from the eye of Shiva which reduces all manifestation to cinders. The sun imposes itself as the symbol par excellence of the One Principle (*Allāhu Ahad*), which is necessary Being, That which alone is sufficient unto Itself in Its absolute plenitude (*Allāhu as-Samad*), and upon which the existence and subsistence of all things depends, beyond which only nothingness remains.

'Monotheism', if one can employ this word to translate *at-tawḥīd*, although it somewhat limits its meaning by making one think inevitably of an exclusively religious point of view, has an essentially 'solar' character. This is nowhere more 'perceptible' than in the desert, where the diversity of things is reduced to a minimum and where at the same time mirages make evident all that is illusory in the manifest world. There, the solar radiation produces things and destroys them in turn; or rather, for it is inexact to say that it destroys them, it transforms them and reabsorbs them after having manifested them. One could find no image more true of Unity endlessly deploying itself outwardly in multiplicity without ceasing

thereby to be itself and without being affected by it, then restoring itself to that multiplicity, still according to appearances, which in reality it never left—for nothing could be outside of the Principle, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away, because It is the indivisible totality of unique Existence. In the intense light of countries of the East, it is enough to see things to understand them, to grasp their profound truth immediately; and it seems especially impossible not to understand these things in the desert, where the sun traces the divine Names in letters of fire in the sky.

4

AL-FAQR

THE CONTINGENT BEING may be defined as one not having in itself its own sufficient reason; consequently, such a being is nothing in itself, and nothing of what it is belongs properly to it. Such is the case of the human being insofar as he is individual, as well as of all manifested beings in whatsoever state they may be, for any difference among the degrees of universal Existence is always as nothing in relation to the Principle. These beings, human or otherwise, are therefore, in all that they are, in a state of complete dependence with regard to the Principle, 'outside of which there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that exists';[1] it is in the consciousness of this dependence that what several traditions call 'spiritual poverty' properly consists. At the same time, for the being that has acquired it, this consciousness immediately results in detachment with respect to all manifested things, for thenceforward the being knows that these things too are nothing, and that their importance is strictly nothing with respect to absolute Reality. In the case of the human being, this detachment implies essentially and above all indifference to the fruits of action, as the *Bhagavad-Gītā* notably teaches, an indifference by which the being escapes the unending chain of the consequences of this action; it is 'action without desire' (*nishkāma karma*), whereas 'action with desire' (*sakāma karma*) is action with a view to its fruits.

By this means the being escapes multiplicity; according to the Taoist expression, it escapes from the vicissitudes of the 'current of

1. Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, *Risālatul-Ahadiyah*.

forms', from the alternation of the states of 'life' and 'death', of 'condensation' and 'dissipation',[2] passing from the circumference of the 'cosmic wheel' to its center, which is itself termed 'the void [the non-manifested] that unites the spokes and makes of them a wheel.'[3] 'He who has arrived at the limit of the void,' said Lao Tzu also, 'will be fixed firmly in repose.... To return to its root [that is, to the Principle, which is both first origin and final end of all beings] means entering into the state of repose.'[4] 'Peace in the void,' says Lieh Tzu, 'is an undefinable state; one neither receives it nor bestows it; one succeeds in establishing oneself in it.'[5] This 'peace in the void' is the 'great peace' (*as-sakīnah*) of Islamic esoterism,[6] which is at the same time the 'divine presence' at the center of the being, implied by union with the Principle, which can only be effected in that very center.

> To the one who dwells in the non-manifested, all beings manifest themselves.... United to the Principle, it is in harmony, through it, with all beings. United to the Principle, it knows all through superior general reasons, and consequently no longer uses its various senses to know in particular and in detail. The true reason of things is invisible, imperceptible, indefinable, indeterminable. Alone, the spirit re-established in its state of perfect simplicity can attain in it deep contemplation.[7]

'Simplicity', an expression of the unification of all the powers of the being, characterizes the return to the 'primordial state'; and we see here the whole difference separating the transcendent knowledge of the sage from ordinary and 'profane' knowledge. This 'simplicity' is also designated elsewhere as the state of 'childhood' (in Sanskrit, *bālya*), naturally understood in the spiritual sense, and is considered in Hindu doctrine as a precondition for the acquisition

2. Aristotle, in a similar sense, says 'generation' and 'corruption'.
3. *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 11.
4. *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 16.
5. *Lieh Tzu*, chap. 1.
6. See 'War and Peace', *The Symbolism of the Cross*, chap. 8.
7. *Lieh Tzu*, chap. 4.

of knowledge par excellence. This brings to mind similar words found in the Gospels: 'Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it,'[8] and, 'Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.'[9]

'Simplicity' and 'littleness' are here basically equivalents of the 'poverty' that is so often mentioned also in the Gospels, and that is generally very much misunderstood: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'[10] According to Islamic esoterism, this 'poverty' (in Arabic, *al-faqru*) leads to *al-fanā'*, that is, to the 'extinction' of the 'ego' [*moi*];[11] and by this 'extinction' one attains the 'divine station' (*al-maqāmul-ilahi*), which is the central point where all distinctions inherent in outward points of view are surpassed, where all oppositions have disappeared and are resolved in a perfect equilibrium.

> In the primordial state these oppositions did not exist. They arise from the diversification of beings [inherent in manifestation and, like it, contingent], and from their contacts caused by the universal gyration [that is, by the rotation of the 'cosmic wheel' around its axis]. They cease to affect the being directly it has reduced its distinct self and its particular movement to almost nothing.[12]

This reduction of the 'distinct self', which finally disappears by being resorbed into one unique point, is the same as *al-fanā'*, and also as the 'void' mentioned above; moreover, according to the symbolism of the wheel, it is evident that the 'movement' of a being is all the more diminished as the being nears the center.

8. Luke 18:17.

9. Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21.

10. Matt. 5:3.

11. This 'extinction' is not without analogy, even as to the literal meaning of the term designating it, with the *Nirvāna* of the Hindu doctrine; beyond *al-fanā'* there is *fanā al-fanāi*, the 'extinction of the extinction', which corresponds similarly to *Parinirvāna*.

12. *Chuang Tzu*, chap. 19.

> This being no longer enters into conflict with any being, because it is established in the infinite, effaced in the indefinite.[13] It has reached and remains at the starting-point of transformations, a neutral point where there are no conflicts. By concentration of its nature, by alimentation of its vital spirit, by a gathering together of all its powers, it has joined itself to the principle of all genesis. Its nature being whole [synthetically totalized in principial unity], its vital spirit being intact, no being can harm it.[14]

The 'simplicity' in question above corresponds to the unity 'without dimensions' of the primordial point, where the movement of return toward the origin ends. 'The man who is absolutely simple sways all beings by his simplicity, so effectively that nothing opposes him in the six regions of space, nothing is hostile to him, and fire and water do not injure him.'[15] Indeed, he remains at the center from which the six directions have issued by radiation, and where, two by two, they come to be neutralized in the movement of return, so that at this unique point their threefold opposition ceases entirely and nothing of what results therefrom or there localizes itself can reach the being that dwells in immutable unity. As the latter opposes nothing, neither can anything oppose it, for opposition is necessarily a reciprocal relation which calls for the presence of two terms and which, consequently, is incompatible with principial unity; and hostility, which is only a result or an exterior manifestation of opposition, cannot exist with regard to a being outside and beyond all opposition. Fire and water, which are the type of opposites in the 'elementary world', cannot injure it, for in truth they no longer even exist for it as contraries, having returned into the indifferentiation of the primordial ether by balancing and neutralizing each other

13. The first of these two expressions refers to the 'personality' and the second to the 'individuality'.

14. Ibid. The last sentence again relates to the conditions of the 'primordial state': it is what the Judeo-Christian tradition designates as the immortality of man before the 'fall', an immortality recovered by the one who, having returned to the 'Center of the World', is nourished by the 'Tree of Life'.

15. *Lieh Tzu*, chap. 2.

through the reunion of their qualities which, though apparently opposed, are really complementary.

This central point, by which communication with the superior or 'celestial' states is established for the human being, is also the 'narrow gate' of the Gospel symbolism, and from everything we have said it will easily be understood who are the 'rich' that cannot pass through it: they are beings attached to multiplicity and therefore incapable of rising from distinctive knowledge to unified knowledge. Indeed, this attachment is the exact opposite of the detachment treated above, just as wealth is the opposite of poverty, and it enchains the being to the indefinite series of the cycles of manifestation.[16] Attachment to multiplicity is also, in a certain sense, the Biblical 'temptation', which, by causing the being to taste of the fruit of the 'Tree of Knowledge of good and evil', that is, of the dualistic and distinctive knowledge of contingent things, moves him away from the primordial central unity and prevents him from attaining the fruits of the 'Tree of Life'; and in fact it is in just this way that the being is subject to the alternation of cyclical changes, that is, to birth and death. The indefinitude of the course of multiplicity is represented precisely by the turns of the serpent coiling itself around the tree which symbolizes the 'World Axis'; it is the path of 'those who are led astray' (*aḍ-ḍāllīn*), of those who 'err' in the etymological sense of this word, as opposed to the 'straight path' (*as-sirātul-mustaqīm*), ascending vertically along the axis itself, which is spoken of in the opening *sūrat* of the Koran.[17]

'Poverty', 'simplicity', and 'childhood', these are but one and the same thing, and the stripping away expressed by these words[18] leads to an 'extinction' which, in reality, is the plenitude of the being, just as 'non-action' (*wu-wei)* is the plenitude of activity since it is from this that all particular activities are derived. 'The Principle is always

16. It is the Buddhist *samsāra*, the indefinite rotation of the 'wheel of life', from which the being must liberate itself to attain *Nirvāna*.

17. This 'straight path' is identical with the *Tè* or 'Uprightness' of Lao Tzu, which is the direction a being must follow in order that its existence may be in accordance with the 'Way' (*Tao*), or, in other words, in conformity with the Principle.

18. This is the 'stripping of the metals' in Masonic symbolism.

non-acting, and yet everything is done through it.'[19] The being that has thus arrived at the central point has by this very fact realized the integrality of the human state; it is the 'true man' (*chen jen*) of Taoism, and when, departing this point to rise to higher states, it will have accomplished the perfect totalization of its possibilities, it will have become the 'divine man' (*shen jen*), who is the 'Universal Man' (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) of Islamic esoterism. Thus it can be said that it is the 'rich' who, from the standpoint of manifestation, are really the 'poor' with respect to the Principle, and inversely; this is what the Gospel expresses very clearly by the words: 'The last will be first, and the first last';[20] and in this regard we note once again the perfect agreement of all the traditional doctrines, which are only diverse expressions of the one Truth.

19. *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 37.
20. Matt. 20:16.

5

AR-RŪḤ

According to the traditional doctrine of the 'science of letters', Allah created the world not by the *alif*, which is the first of the letters [of the Arabic alphabet], but by the *ba*, which is the second; and, in fact, although unity is necessarily the first principle of manifestation, it is duality that manifestation immediately presupposes, and it is between the two terms of this duality as between the two complementary poles of manifestation represented by the two extremities of *ba*, that all the indefinite multiplicity of contingent existences will be produced. It is therefore *ba* which is properly the origin of creation, and the latter is accomplished by it and in it, that is to say it is both the 'means' and the 'place,' according to the two meanings that the letter has when taken as the preposition *bi* [i.e., 'by' and 'in'].[1] The *ba* in this primordial role represents *ar-Rūḥ*, the Spirit, which one must understand as the total Spirit of universal Existence, and which is essentially identified as Light (*an-Nūr*); it is produced directly by 'divine commandment' (*min amri 'Llah*), and after it is produced, it is in every way the instrument by which this 'commandment' brings about all things, which are thus all 'ordered' in relation to it;[2] prior to it, there is then only *al-amr*, the affirmation of pure Being and the first formulation of the Supreme Will, since before duality there is only unity, as before the *ba* there is only

1. Thus *ba* or its equivalent is the first letter of sacred books: the Torah begins with *Bereshith*, the Koran with *Bismi 'Llah*, and, even though we do not actually have the text of the Gospels in a sacred language, one can still remark that the first letter of the Gospel of St John, in Hebrew, would also be *Bereshith*.

2. From the root *amr* derives the Hebrew word *yāmer*, used in Genesis to express the act of creation represented as the divine 'Word.'

the *alif*. Now the *alif* is the 'polar' letter (*qutbāniyyah*), of which the very form is that of the 'axis' through which divine 'order' is carried out;[3] and the upper point of the *alif*, which is the 'secret of secrets' (*sirr al-asrār*), is reflected in the dot of the *ba*, inasmuch as this dot is the center of the 'first circumference' (*al-dāïrah al-awwaliyyah*) that defines and envelopes the domain of universal Existence, a circumference, moreover, which seen in simultaneity in all possible directions, is in reality a sphere, the primordial and total form from which all particular forms will be born through differentiation.

If one considers the vertical form of the *alif* and the horizontal form of the *ba*, one sees that their relationship is that of an active principle and a passive principle; and this conforms to the axioms of the science of numbers on unity and duality, not only in the Pythagorean teaching, which is generally best known in this regard, but also in all other traditions. This character of passivity is effectively inherent in the double role as 'instrument' and universal 'place' of which we have just spoken; thus *ar-Rūḥ*, in Arabic, is a feminine word; but here we must be careful, for according to the law of analogy, what is passive or negative in regard to Divine Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) becomes active or positive in regard to creation (*al-Khalq*).[4] It is essential to consider here the two opposing faces, since it is precisely a question, if one may so express it, of the very 'limit' posed between *al-Ḥaqq* and *al-Khalq*, a 'limit' by which creation is both separated from the divine Principle and united to it at the same time, according to the point of view from which it is envisaged; it is thus, in other words, the *barzakh* par excellence,[5] and just as Allah is 'the First and the Last' (*al-Awwal wa al-Akhir*) in the absolute sense, so is *ar-Rūḥ* 'the first and the last' relative to creation.

3. As we have already said in 'A Hieroglyph of the Pole', [*Symbols of Sacred Science*, chap. 17] *alif* = *quṭb* = 111; let us add that the Divine Name *al-'Alī* (The Most High) has the same number also.

4. In the Hebrew Kabbalah, this double aspect corresponds in a certain sense to that of the feminine *Shekinah* and the masculine *Metatron*, as the following discussion will make clear. [See *The King of the World*, chap. 3. ED.]

5. See Titus Burckhardt's 'Du Barzakh', in *Études Traditionnelles* (December 1937) [and (in English) in *Studies in Comparative Religion* (Winter–Spring 1979) and *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science & Sacred Art*, tr. William

This is not, of course, to say that the term *ar-Rūḥ* may not sometimes be taken in its more specific meanings, like the word 'spirit' or its more or less exact equivalents in other languages; it is thus that, notably in certain Koranic texts, some are led to think that it might represent a name of the Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) or of another angel to whom this name of *ar-Rūḥ* might more especially be applied; and all this can assuredly be true according to the case or the application, for everything that is a participation or a specification of the universal Spirit, or that plays its role in a certain respect and in varying degrees, is also *rūḥ* in a relative sense, comprising the spirit insofar as it resides in a human being or any other particular being. However, there is a point to which many exoteric commentators seem not to have paid sufficient attention: when *ar-Rūḥ* is expressly and distinctly mentioned as beside the angels (*al-malāïkah*),[6] how is it possible to admit that in fact it is simply another angel itself?[7] The esoteric interpretation is that in such a case it is then a question of *Mītatrūn* (the *Metatron* of the Hebrew Kabbalah); moreover, this allows one to explain the ambiguity that arises in this regard, since *Metatron* is also represented as an angel, although, being beyond the domain of 'separate' existences, he must be truly something else and

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Stoddart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp193–99. *Barzakh* is Arabic for 'bridge' or 'isthmus'. Burckhardt writes: 'It can thus be compared to a prism which breaks down the integral light of a higher world into the varied colors of a lower world, or again to a lens which concentrates the rays from above by filtering them through a single point of inversion.' Ed.]

6. For example, in the *Sūrat al-Qadr* (97, 4): *Tanazzalu'l-malāïkatu wa'r-rūhu fihā...*'

7. In 'The Roots of Plants' in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, Guénon points out that the Arabic *mālik* or *malaki* is an anagram for *Mikaël* (*Mikal*), the archangel, who is also associated with *Metatron*, 'the angel of the Face', with whom he shares a 'solar function'. He goes on to say: 'But it is applicable also to every angel, the "bearer" of the divine name with regard to manifestation; and even, as seen from the side of the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), it is really not other than this very name. The only difference here is that which results from a certain hierarchy that can be established between the divine attributes, according to whether they proceed more or less directly from the essence, so that their manifestation can be considered as situated at different levels, which is in fact the basis of the angelic hierarchies. Furthermore, these attributes or these aspects must necessarily be conceived as being of indefinite multitude once they are envisaged 'distinctively'; and it is to this that the very multitude of the angels corresponds.' Ed.

more than an angel; and this, moreover, corresponds once again to the double aspect of the *barzakh*.[8]

Another consideration which agrees completely with this interpretation is this: in the representation of the 'Throne' (*al-Arsh*), *ar-Rūḥ* is placed at the center, and this place is effectively that of *Metatron*; the 'Throne' is the place of the 'divine Presence,' that is, of the *Shekinah* which, in the Hebrew tradition, is the 'twin' [*parèdre*] or complementary aspect of *Metatron*. Moreover, one can even say that in a certain fashion *ar-Rūḥ* is identified with the 'Throne' itself, for by surrounding and enveloping all worlds (from which the epithet *al-Muhīt* is given it), it coincides with the 'first circumference' mentioned earlier.[9] This again recalls the two faces of *barzakh*: on the side of *al-Ḥaqq*, it is *ar-Raḥmān* [the Infinitely Good] who sits on the Throne;[10] but on the side of *al-Khalq* [creation], it appears in a way rather as a refraction of *ar-Rūḥ*, which is in direct agreement with the meaning of the *ḥadīth*, 'He who sees me sees the Truth' (*man raanī faqad raanī al-Ḥaqq*). There, in fact, lies the mystery of 'prophetic' manifestation,[11] and it is known that according to Hebrew tradition, also, *Metatron* is both the agent of 'theophanies' and the very principle of prophecy,[12] which, expressed in Islamic language, amounts to saying that he is none other than *ar-Rūḥ al-muḥammadiyyah* [the spirit of Muhammad], within which all the prophets and divine messengers are one, and which, in the 'lower

8. In certain esoteric formulas, the name of *ar-Rūḥ* is associated, on the celestial plane, with those of the four angels, as the Prophet, on the earthly plane, is associated with the four first *Caliphs* of Islam; that corresponds indeed to *Mitatrūn*, who moreover is identified notably thus as *ar-Rūḥ al-muḥammadiyyah*.

9. On the subject of the 'Throne' and of *Metatron*, envisaged from the point of view of the Kabbalah and Hebrew angelology, compare Basilide, 'Notes sur le monde céleste' (*Études Traditionnelles*, July 1934, pp274–75) and 'Les Anges' (ibid., Feb. 1935), pp88–90.

10. According to this verse of *Sūrat Tahā* (20, 5): *Ar-Raḥmānu al 'arshi estawā*.

11. One could mention here a similarity between the concept of the Prophet and that of the *Avatāra*, although they proceed in an inverse sense, the second starting with a consideration of the principle which manifests itself, whereas the first starts from the 'support' of that manifestation (and the 'Throne' is also the 'support' of the Divinity).

12. Cf. *The King of the World*, chap. 3

world,' finds its ultimate expression in him who is their 'seal' (*Khātim al-anbiāï wa'l-mursalīn*), that is, the one who reunites them into one final synthesis that is the reflection of their principial unity in the 'higher world' (where it is *awwal Khalqi' Llah*, the last in the manifested order by being analogically the first in the principial order), and who is thus the 'lord of the first and the last' (*seyyid al-awwalīn wa'l-akhirīn*). It is thus and only thus that all the names and titles of the Prophet can be understood in their profundity, which names, in fact, are those of 'Universal Man' (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*), ultimately totalizing in him all the degrees of Existence as they have all been contained in him since the beginning: *alayhi salatu Rabbil-Arshi dawman*, 'May the prayer of the Lord of the Throne be upon him forever!'

6

NOTES ON ANGELIC NUMBER SYMBOLISM IN THE ARABIC ALPHABET

The Divine 'Throne' which surrounds all worlds (*al-Arsh al-Muhīt*) is represented by the figure of a circle, as is easily understood. In the center[1] is *ar-Rūḥ* [the Spirit], as we explained in the last chapter, and the 'Throne' is supported by eight angels positioned on the circumference, the first four at the four cardinal points and the other four at four intermediary points. The names of these eight angels are formed by various groups of letters arranged according to their numeric values in such a way that, taken together, the names comprise all the letters of the alphabet.

It should be recalled that in this case of course the alphabet in question has 28 letters; but it is said that at the very beginning the Arabic alphabet had only 22 letters, corresponding exactly to those of the Hebrew alphabet; in doing so, the distinction is made between the lesser *jafr*,[2] which uses only 22 letters, and the greater *jafr*, which uses 28 and conceives of them all with distinct numerical values. Moreover, it can be said that 28 (2 + 8 = 10) is contained in 22 (2 + 2 = 4) as 10 is contained in 4, according to the formula of the

1. For the significance of the symbolism of center and circumference, see Guénon's 'The Idea of the Center in the Traditions of Antiquity', *Symbols of Sacred Science*, chap. 8. Ed.

2. *Jafr* is the esoteric science of numbers in Islam. Ed.

Pythagorean *Tetraktys*: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10;[3] and, in fact, the six supplementary letters are only modifications of the original six letters from which they are formed by a simple addition of a dot, and to which they are restored immediately by the suppression of this same dot. These six supplementary letters are those which comprise the last two of the eight groups just mentioned; it is evident that if one does not consider them as distinct letters, these groups would be modified, either as to their number or as to their composition. As a result, the passage from the alphabet of 22 letters to the alphabet of 28 letters must necessarily have led to a change in the angelic names in question, and thereby a change in the 'entities' which these names designate; but, strange as it may seem to some, this is actually normal, for all modifications of traditional forms, and in particular those affecting the constitution of their sacred languages, must effectively have their 'archetypes' in the celestial world.

This having been said, the distribution of letters and names is as follows:

At the four cardinal points:

East: A B[4] Ja D
West: Ha Wa Z
North: Ḥa Ta Y
South: Ka L Ma N

At the four intermediate points:

North-East: Sa ʿA Fa Ṣ
North-West: Qa R Sha T
South-East: Tha Kha Dh
South-West: Ḍa Za Gh

3. See 'The *Tetraktys* and the Square of Four', *Symbols of Sacred Science*, chap. 16.

4. Of course the *alif* and *ba* take their place here in their numeric rank, as do the rest of the letters; this does not in any way interfere with the symbolic considerations we are expounding and which in addition give them another very special role.

It will be noticed that each of the two groups of four names contains exactly half of the alphabet, or 14 letters, which are distributed respectively in the following fashion:

In the first half: $4 + 3 + 3 + 4 = 14$
In the second half: $4 + 4 + 3 + 3 = 14$

The numeric values of the eight names formed from the sum of those of their letters are, taking them naturally in the same order as above:

$$1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$$
$$5 + 6 + 7 = 18$$
$$8 + 9 + 10 = 27$$
$$20 + 30 + 40 + 50 = 140$$
$$60 + 70 + 80 + 90 = 300$$
$$100 + 200 + 300 + 400 = 1{,}000$$
$$500 + 600 + 700 = 1{,}800$$
$$800 + 900 + 1{,}000 = 2{,}700$$

The values of the last three names are equal to those of the first three multiplied by 100, which is clear enough if one notices that the first three contain the numbers from 1 through 10, and the last three the hundreds from 100 to 1,000, both groups being equally distributed into $4 + 3 + 3$.

The value of the first half of the alphabet is the sum of those of the first four names: $10 + 18 + 27 + 140 = 195$. Similarly, that of the second half is the sum of the last four names: $300 + 1{,}000 + 1{,}800 + 2{,}700 = 5{,}800$. Finally, the total value of the entire alphabet is: $195 + 5{,}800 = 5{,}995$

This number 5,995 is remarkable for its symmetry: its central part is 99, the number of the 'attributes' of Allah; the outside numbers form 55, the sum of the first ten numbers, the denary moreover being in turn divisible into two halves ($5 + 5 = 10$); besides, $5 + 5 = 10$ and $9 + 9 = 18$ is the numerical value of the first two names.

One can better account for the way in which the number 5,995 is obtained by apportioning the alphabet according to another division, in three series of nine letters, plus one isolated letter; the sum of the first nine numbers is 45, the numerical value of the name

Adam (1 + 4 + 40 = 45, that is, from the point of view of the esoteric hierarchy, *al-Quṭb al-Ghawth* [the Supreme Pole][5] at the center, the four *Awtād* [pillars] at the cardinal points, and the 40 *Anjāb* on the circumference); the sum of the tens, from 10 to 90, is 45 x 10 [450]; and that of the hundreds, from 100 to 900, is 45 x 100 [4,500]; altogether, the sums of these three series of nines is thus the product of 45 x 111 = 4,995, the 'polar' number which is that of *alif* 'developed';[6] one must add to that the number of the last letter, 1000, or unity to the fourth degree, which terminates the alphabet, just as unity of the first degree begins it, giving, finally, 5,995.

Finally, the sum of the digits of this number is 5 + 9 + 9 + 5 = 28, which is the very number of the letters in the alphabet of which it represents the total value.

One could assuredly develop still other considerations starting from these givens, but these few indications will suffice to give at least an idea of certain procedures of the science of letters and numbers in the Islamic tradition.

5. *Al-Quṭb al-Ghawth*, or the Supreme Pole, is described in the author's 'A Hieroglyph of the Pole' (*Symbols of Sacred Science*, chap. 7) as 'situated between heaven and earth at a point which is exactly over the Ka'bah, which, precisely, has the form of a cube and which is itself one of the representations of the "Center of the World"'. Ed.

6. In the article mentioned above the author goes on to say: '[L]et it be added that the letter *alif* is considered as being especially "polar" (*quṭbāniyyah*); its name and the word *quṭb* are numerically equivalent: *alif* = 1 + 30 + 80 = 111; *quṭb* = 100 + 9 + 2 = 111. This number 111 represents unity expressed in the three worlds, which is a perfectly apt way of describing the very function of the Pole.' Ed.

7

THE SCIENCE OF HAND-READING IN SUFISM

We have often had occasion to point out how foreign the concept of 'traditional sciences' has become to Westerners in modern times, and how difficult it is for them to understand its true nature. Yet another example of this incomprehension recently came to our attention in a study devoted to Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, in which the author expressed surprise at finding, side by side with the latter's purely spiritual doctrine, numerous considerations on astrology, the science of letters and numbers, symbolic geometry, and many other things of the same order which he seemed to regard as having no link with the doctrine itself. There was a double misapprehension, moreover, for the properly spiritual part of the teaching of Muḥyi 'd-Dīn was itself presented as 'mystical', whereas it is essentially metaphysical and initiatic; and if something 'mystical' were at issue, it could have no effective connection with sciences of any sort whatsoever. On the contrary, whenever it is a question of spiritual or metaphysical doctrine, these traditional sciences—the value of which the same author totally failed to recognize, in accordance with the usual modern preconceptions—follow normally from it as applications, just as consequences derive from a principle, and thus, far from representing somewhat adventitious or heterogeneous elements, they form an integral part of *taṣawwuf*, that is to say the totality of the initiatic sciences.

Of these traditional sciences, most are completely unknown to Westerners today, and of others they know only more or less unconnected bits and pieces, often so degenerated as to have become nothing more than practical 'recipes' or simple 'divinatory arts' clearly devoid of any doctrinal value. As an example of just how far from reality it is to envisage them in such a way, we shall here offer some instruction on the science of hand-reading (*'ilm al-kaff*) in Islamic esoterism, which in any case constitutes only one of the many branches of what might be called, for want of any better term, 'physiognomy', although this word does not do justice to the full scope of the Arabic term (*'ilm al-firāsah*) denoting this group of sciences.

The science of hand-reading, strange as this may seem to those who have no notion of such things, is, in its Islamic form, directly related to the science of the divine names: the arrangement of the principal lines of the left hand trace out the number 81, and those of the right 18,[1] giving a total of 99, which is the number of the names attributed to Allah (*sifatiyyah*). As for the name Allah itself, it is formed by the fingers in the following way: the little finger corresponds to the *alif*, the ring finger to the first *lam*, the middle and index fingers to the second *lam*, which is double, and the thumb to the *ha* (as regularly drawn in its 'open' form); and here lies the principal reason for the widespread use of the hand as a symbol in all Islamic countries (a secondary reason being connected with the number 5, whence the name *khums*, which is sometimes given to this symbolic hand). From this we may understand the meaning of the verse in the book of Job: 'He seals (*khātim*) up the hand of every man, that all men may know his work';[2] and it may be added that this is not unrelated to the essential role of the hand in the rites of benediction and consecration.

The correspondence between the different parts of the hand and the planets (*kawākib*), on the other hand, is generally known, and

1. That is, in the Hindu numerals that have been used for centuries in the Islamic world, excepting Northwest Africa, where the Arabic numerals are still in use. The Hindu 81 and 18 are, respectively, like an inverted Roman VI and IV. Ed.

2. Job 37:7.

even Western chiromancy has retained it, though in such a way as to see in it no more than conventional designations, whereas in reality this correspondence establishes an effective link between the sciences of hand-reading and astrology. Moreover, one of the chief prophets presides over each of the planetary heavens as its 'pole' (*al-quṭb*); and the qualities and sciences linked more especially to each of these prophets also have a relationship with the corresponding astral influence. The list of the seven celestial *aqtāb* [plural of *quṭb*] is as follows: Adam, the heaven of the moon (*al-Qamar*); Jesus, the heaven of Mercury (*al-Utārid*); Joseph, the heaven of Venus (*az-Zohrah*); Idris [Enoch], the heaven of the sun (*as-Shams*); David, the heaven of Mars (*al-Mirrīkh*); Moses, the heaven of Jupiter (*al-Barjīs*); and Abraham, the heaven of Saturn (*al-Kaywān*).

To Adam corresponds the cultivation of the earth (cf. Gen. 2:15): 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it'; to Jesus corresponds knowledge of a purely spiritual order; to Joseph, beauty and the arts; to Idris, the 'intermediary sciences', that is, those of a cosmological and psychic order; to David, government; to Moses, with whom his brother Harun [Aaron] is inseparably associated, religious matters under the double aspect of legislation and worship; and to Abraham, faith (this correspondence with the seventh heaven must be compared with what we recently noted in connection with Dante,[3] as to its placement on the highest of the seven rungs of the initiatic ladder).

Furthermore, the other prophets, both known (that is, mentioned by name in the Koran—twenty-five in number) and unknown (all the others, the number of the prophets being 124,000 according to tradition) are also distributed around the principal prophets throughout the seven planetary spheres.

The ninety-nine names which express the divine qualities are also distributed according to this septenary: 15 for the heaven of the sun, by reason of its central position, and 14 for each the other six heavens ($15 + 6 \times 14 = 99$). An examination of the signs found on the part of the hand corresponding to each planet indicates in what proportion (8/14 or 8/15) the subject possesses the qualities related to each;

3. See *The Esoterism of Dante*, chaps. 2 and 3. ED.

this proportion itself corresponds to a same number (*s*) of divine names among those belonging to the planetary heaven in question; and these names themselves can then be determined by means of a very long and complicated calculation.

It may be added that the region of the wrist, beyond the hand properly speaking, is the place corresponding to the two highest heavens, those of the fixed stars and the empyrean, which, together with the seven planetary heavens, complete the number 9.

Moreover, the twelve zodiacal signs (*burūj*) are located in different parts of the hand, and are linked, moreover, to the planets, of which they are the respective 'houses' (one apiece for the sun and moon and two for each of the other planets), and also to the sixteen figures of geomancy (*'ilm ar-raml*), for all the traditional sciences are closely linked together.

An examination of the left hand indicates the 'nature' (*at-tabiyah*) of the subject, that is, the collection of tendencies, dispositions, or aptitudes that in some way constitute his innate characteristics. The right hand exhibits the acquired characteristics (*al-iktisāb*), and since these latter change continually, the reading must be repeated every four months if a thorough study is to be made. This period of four months constitutes in effect a complete cycle, in the sense that it brings us back once more to a zodiacal sign corresponding to the same element as that of the starting-point, the order of the correspondence with the elements being, as one knows, fire (*nār*), earth (*turāb*), air (*hawā*), and water (*mā'*). It is therefore an error to suppose, as some have, that the period in question should be only three months, for this period only corresponds to one season, that is, one part of the annual cycle, and is not itself a complete cycle.

These few indications, brief as they are, will serve to show how a traditional, regularly constituted science is attached to principles of a doctrinal order and is entirely subject to them; and at the same time they will serve to illustrate the truth we have so often affirmed, that such a science is strictly bound to a definite traditional form so that it would be quite unusable outside the civilization for which it was intended. Here, for example, the considerations relating to the divine names and the prophets, which are precisely those upon

which all the rest is based, would be inapplicable outside the Islamic world, just as, to take another example, onomantic calculus [a method of calculation based on the numerical values of names], whether used in isolation or as an element in the casting of a horoscope in certain astrological methods, could only be valid for Arabic names, the letters of which have fixed numerical values. In this order of contingent applications there is always a question of adaptation which makes it impossible to transfer these sciences just as they are, from one traditional form to another; and no doubt this is also one of the principal reasons why they tend to be so incomprehensible to those who, like modern Westerners, have no equivalent in their own civilization.[4]

4. The facts used as a basis for these notes are taken from the unedited treatises of Shaykh Seyid Ali Nūreddin Al-Bayūmi, founder of the *ṭarīqah* that bears his name (*bayūmiyah*); these manuscripts are at present still in the possession of his direct descendents.

8

THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION IN THE WEST

Most Europeans have not accurately assessed the importance of the contributions that Islamic civilization has made to its own, nor have they understood the nature of their borrowings from this civilization in the past, some going so far as to disregard totally all that is connected with it. This is because the history they are taught makes a travesty of the facts and seems to have been altered intentionally on a great many points. Indeed, this history goes to extremes in flaunting the little respect it has for Islamic civilization, the merits of which it habitually disparages each time an occasion presents itself. It is important to point out that the teaching of history in European universities pays no heed to the influence in question. On the contrary, the truths which ought to be told on this subject, whether through teaching or writing, are systematically set aside, especially concerning the most important events.

For example, though it is generally known that Spain remained under Islamic rule for several centuries, it is never mentioned that the same was true in other countries such as Sicily or the southern part of present-day France. Some wish to attribute this silence of the historians to religious prejudice. But what can one say of current historians, most of whom are without any religion (if, indeed, they are not enemies of religion), when they confirm what their predecessors have said contrary to the truth?

We must therefore see this as a result of the pride and presumption of Westerners, which prevent them from recognizing the truth or the importance of their debts to the East.

Even stranger is that Europeans consider themselves the direct heirs of Hellenic civilization, whereas the facts belie this claim. The truth is that Greek science and philosophy were transmitted to Europeans through Muslim intermediaries, as history itself incontestably bears out; in other words, the intellectual patrimony of the Greeks reached the West only after it had been seriously studied in the Near East, and had it not been for Islamic scholars and philosophers, Europeans would have remained in total ignorance of these teachings for a very long time, if indeed they would ever have come to know them.

It is fitting to point out that here we are speaking of the influence of Islamic civilization and not specifically of Arabic civilization, as is sometimes wrongly said, for the majority of those who have exerted this influence in the West were not of the Arab race; and if their language happened to Arabic, it was so only as a consequence of their adoption of the religion of Islam.

Since we have been led to speak of the Arabic language, we can see certain proof of the extent of this same Islamic influence in the West in the existence of a great many more words with Arabic roots than is generally acknowledged. These words have been incorporated in almost all European languages, and continue to be used to the present day, although many of the Europeans who employ them are ignorant of their true origin. As words are nothing less than vehicles for ideas and the means of exteriorizing thought, these facts clearly enough establish the transmission of Islamic ideas and concepts.

In fact, the influence of Islamic civilization has spread extensively and most perceptibly into all domains, including science, the arts, and philosophy. Spain was a very important factor in this regard and was the principal center of diffusion of this civilization. Our intention is not to treat each of these aspects in detail or to define the area of expansion of Islamic civilization, but only to indicate certain facts that we consider particularly important, no matter how few people in our day recognize that importance.

Regarding the sciences, we can make a distinction between the natural sciences and the mathematical sciences. Of the former, we know for a certainty that some were transmitted by Islamic civilization to Europe, which adopted them in full from Islam. Chemistry, for example, has always kept its Arabic name, a name which goes

back to ancient Egypt moreover, and this despite the fact that the first and most profound meaning of this science had been completely lost to modern men.

To take another example, that of astronomy, the technical terms of this science used in all European languages are, for the most part, still of Arabic origin, and the names of many of the celestial bodies used by astronomers of all countries continue to be the original Arabic names. This is due to the fact that the works of Greek astronomers in antiquity, such as Ptolemy of Alexandria, were known to the West in their Arabic translations, as were those of their Muslim successors. Moreover, it would be easy to show that in general most geographic knowledge regarding the furthest reaches of Asia and Africa was for many years gained from Arab explorers who had visited numerous regions, and one could cite many other facts of this kind.

Regarding many inventions, which were no more than applications of the natural sciences, these have followed the same path of transmission, that is, Muslim mediation, and the story of the 'water clock' presented by Caliph Harun al-Rashid to the Emperor Charlemagne has not yet disappeared from memory.

The mathematical sciences call for special attention in this context, for in this vast domain it is not only Greek science that was transmitted to the West through the intermediary of Islamic civilization, but also that of the Hindus. The Greeks had also developed geometry, and for them even the science of numbers was always related to a consideration of the corresponding geometric figures. This pre-eminence accorded to geometry appears clearly, for example, in Plato. There is, however, another area of mathematics relating to the science of numbers which, unlike the others under Greek nomenclature in European languages, is not known because the Greeks were ignorant of it. This science is algebra, which came originally from India, and its Arabic name shows clearly enough how it was transmitted to the West.

Something else worth pointing out despite its lesser importance again corroborates what we have been saying, and this is the fact that the numerals used by Europeans have always been called 'Arabic numerals', although their actual origin is Hindu, for the signs of

numeration originally used by the Arabs were none other than the letters of the alphabet themselves.

If we now leave an examination of the sciences to look at the arts, we will see that in literature and poetry many of the ideas that originated with Muslim writers and poets have been used in European literature, and that some Western writers have even gone as far as pure and simple imitation of their works. Similarly, one can detect traces of Islamic influence in architecture, which resulted in a style wholly distinctive to the Middle Ages; thus, the ogival arch which had such a profound influence that it gave its name to an architectural style [ogival or gothic], incontestably had its origins in Islamic architecture; and although many fantastic theories have been invented to conceal this truth, they are contradicted by the existence of a tradition among the builders themselves, which constantly affirms the transmission of their knowledge from the Near East.

This knowledge assumed a secret character and gave a symbolic meaning to their art; it was closely related to the science of numbers, and its origins were always linked to the men who had built the Temple of Solomon. Whatever the distant source of this science, it could not possibly have been transmitted to medieval Europe by any intermediary other than the Muslim world; and in this connection it should be added that these builders, organized into guilds possessing special rites, considered themselves to be, and designated themselves as, 'foreigners' [*étrangers*] in the West, even though they were born there, and this designation has endured to the present day, although these things may have become obscure and are now understood only by a few.

In this brief account, we must make a special mention of philosophy, where Islamic influence attained such considerable importance in the Middle Ages that even the most implacable adversaries of the East could not misconstrue its impact. One can truly say that Europe at that time had no other means at its disposal for acquiring knowledge of Greek philosophy. The Latin translations of Plato and Aristotle in use at the time had not been made directly from Greek originals, but from earlier Arabic translations, to which were joined commentaries by contemporary Muslim philosophers, such as Averroës, Avicenna, and others.

The philosophy of the period, known as scholasticism, is generally differentiated into Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. But it was Muslim learning that was the source of the other two, and more especially of Jewish philosophy which flourished in Spain through the vehicle of the Arabic language. This is evidenced in such important authors as Maimonides, who inspired later Jewish philosophers for several centuries even to Spinoza, in whose works some of his ideas are still quite recognizable.

But it is not necessary to continue this enumeration of facts known to everyone who has some notion of the history of ideas. It would be better to end with other facts of a very different order, totally unknown to most moderns, who, especially in Europe, have not even an inkling of them, whereas from our point of view these things are of considerably greater interest than all the outward knowledge of science and philosophy. We mean esoterism with all that relates to it, and the knowledge derived therefrom, constituting sciences completely different from those known to moderns.

The Europe of our day no longer has anything that might recall these sciences; beyond this, the West is ignorant of the true knowledge represented by esoterism and its related sciences, although in the Middle Ages it was completely otherwise; and in this sphere, too, Islamic influence appeared in a most luminous and evident way during that epoch. It is furthermore very easy to recover its traces in works of multiple meanings, where the real aim was something completely other than literary.

Some Europeans have themselves begun to discover something of this kind, notably through the study they have made of Dante's poems, though without achieving a perfect comprehension of their true nature. Several years ago a Spanish orientalist, Miguel Asìn Palacios, wrote a work about Muslim influences in the work of Dante,[1] demonstrating that many of the symbols and expressions used by the poet had been used before him by Muslim esoterists,

1. See Miguel Asìn Palacios, *La Escatologia Musulmana en la Divina Comedia: sequida de la historia y critica de una polemica* (Madrid: Editorial Maestre, 1961). In English, *Islam and the Divine Comedy,* tr. Harold Sutherland (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968). Ed.

and in particular by Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī. Unhappily, the remarks of this scholar did not show the importance of these symbols in the composition of the work. A recently deceased Italian writer, Luigi Valli, studied the work of Dante rather more profoundly and concluded that he was not alone in employing symbolic methods used in esoteric Persian and Arabic poetry; in Dante's own country and among his contemporaries, all these poets were members of a secret society known as the 'Fedeli d'Amore', of which Dante himself was one of the leaders. But when Luigi Valli tried to penetrate the meaning of their 'secret language', it proved impossible for him to recognize the true character of this organization, or of others of the same nature established in Europe in the Middle Ages.[2] The truth is that certain unknown personalities were behind these associations and inspired them; they were known under different names, of which the most important was 'Brothers of the Rose-Cross'. These persons, however, had no written rules and did not constitute a society; neither did they have fixed meetings, and all that one can say of them is that they attained a certain spiritual state which authorizes us to call them European 'Sufis', or at least *mutaṣawwufīn*, having arrived at a high degree in this hierarchy. One also hears that these 'Brothers of the Rose-Cross' who served as a 'cover' for the corporations of builders mentioned earlier, taught alchemy and other sciences identical to those then in full flower in the Islamic world. In truth, they formed a link in the chain connecting East to West and established a permanent contact with the Muslim Sufis, a contact symbolized by the journeys attributed to their legendary founder.

But facts such as these do not come within the purview of ordinary history, which does not push its investigations further than the outer aspect of facts, although one might say that it is there that one finds the true key which can open the door to so many enigmas that otherwise would remain forever obscure and undecipherable.

2. See *The Esoterism of Dante.* [Cf. also *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, especially chaps. 4, 5, and 7. Ed.]

9

CREATION AND MANIFESTATION

On various occasions we have noted that the idea of 'creation' understood in its proper and exact sense and without more or less stretching its meaning abusively, is really encountered only in the traditions belonging to a unique lineage, that of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and since this lineage is that of traditional forms which can be described as specifically religious, one can conclude that there is a direct link between this idea and the religious point of view itself. If the word 'creation' were to be employed in any other context, it could only convey most imprecisely a different idea altogether, for which it would be preferable to find another expression; moreover, such usage is usually only the result of one of the confusions or false assimilations that are so often produced in the West concerning Eastern doctrines. However, it is not enough merely to avoid this confusion; we must also carefully guard ourselves from another and opposing error, that of wanting to see a contradiction or some opposition between the idea of creation and this other idea to which we have just alluded, and for which the most appropriate term at our disposal is 'manifestation'. It is this latter that we now propose to examine.

Some people, recognizing that the idea of creation is not found in Eastern doctrines (with the exception of Islam, which, of course, should not be cited in this regard), and without trying to go more deeply into things, immediately assume that the absence of this idea is the mark of something incomplete or defective, and conclude that the doctrines in question should not be considered an adequate expression of the truth. If this is so from the religious point of

view, which too often maintains a disagreeable 'exclusivism', one must recognize that it is also so from the anti-religious perspective, which would like to draw a completely contrary conclusion from the same observation; these people, naturally attacking the idea of creation, as they do all other ideas of a religious character, pretend to see in its very absence a sort of superiority; moreover, they obviously do this in a spirit of negation and opposition only, and not in order to undertake a true defense of Eastern doctrines, with which they scarcely concern themselves. However that may be, neither these reproaches nor these praises are worth much and neither attitude is acceptable any longer, since they finally proceed from one and the same error, exploited according to the respective contrary tendencies of those involved. The truth is that both the one and the other completely miss the mark, and in both cases there is an almost equal incomprehension.

The reason for this shared error is, moreover, not very difficult to discover. Those whose intellectual horizon does not extend beyond Western philosophical conceptions ordinarily imagine that where there is no question of creation, but where it is nonetheless also clear that it is not a question of materialistic theories, there can be only 'pantheism'. Now, one is aware how often this word is used indiscriminately in our day; for some it represents a veritable bugbear, to such a point that they believe they can dispense with a serious examination of that to which they are so quick to apply the term (the current expression 'to fall into pantheism' is indeed characteristic in this respect), while, probably because of this very attitude more than for any other reason, others freely embrace pantheism and are immediately disposed to take it up as a kind of rallying-cry. It is thus quite clear that in the thinking of both of these groups, what we have just said is closely connected to the imputation of 'pantheism' commonly made to Eastern doctrines, and which we have so often shown to be completely false, indeed, even absurd (since pantheism is in reality an essentially anti-metaphysical theory), that it is useless to return again to this subject.

Since we are speaking of pantheism, we should take this occasion to make an observation which has a certain importance here regarding a word that is commonly associated with pantheist conceptions.

This is the word 'emanation', which some people, always for similar reasons and because of similar confusions, would like to use to designate manifestation when this latter is not presented under the aspect of creation. Now, this word must absolutely be set aside when speaking of traditional and orthodox doctrines, not only because of this troublesome association (whether or not the latter may in fact be ultimately justified, a point that does not interest us just here), but especially because in itself and through its etymology, the word does not express anything other than a pure and simple impossibility. Indeed, the idea of 'emanation' is properly that of a 'going out'; but manifestation must not in any way be envisaged thus, for in reality nothing can go out from the Principle; if something were to go out of it, from that moment on the Principle could no longer be infinite, being limited by the very fact of manifestation; the truth is that outside of the Principle there is not and cannot be anything but nothingness. Even if one wishes to consider 'emanation', not with respect to the supreme and infinite Principle, but only in relation to Being, the immediate principle of manifestation, this term would still give rise to the following objection, different from the previous one, but no less decisive: if beings go out from Being in order to manifest themselves, one could not say that in reality they were beings, and thus they would literally be bereft of all existence, for existence, in whatever mode it may be, cannot be anything other than a participation in Being; this consequence, besides being as manifestly absurd in itself as in the other case, is contradictory to the very idea of manifestation.

Having made these remarks, we will now state clearly that the idea of manifestation, taken in the purely metaphysical way in which the Eastern doctrines envisage it, is not at all opposed to the idea of creation. The two terms merely refer to different levels and different points of view, so that it is sufficient to know how to situate each in its true place in order to realize that there is no incompatibility between them. The difference on this as on many other points is, in the final analysis, merely that between the metaphysical point of view and the religious point of view. Now, if it is true that the first is of a higher and more profound order than the second, it is no less true that it should in no way annul or contradict the latter,

which moreover is sufficiently proven by the fact that both can well coexist within one and the same traditional form, a point to which we shall return later. Basically, then, what we have here is only a difference which, though somewhat more accentuated by reason of the very sharp distinction drawn between the two corresponding domains, is no more extraordinary or puzzling than the difference between the legitimately diverse points of view found in one and the same domain according to one's depth of penetration. Here we are thinking of points of view such as those of Shankarāchārya and Rāmānuja in relationship to the Vedanta; it is true that in this instance, too, incomprehension can find contradictions which do not exist in reality, but this only makes the analogy more exact and more complete.

Moreover, it is proper to point out the very meaning of the idea of creation, for this also seems to give rise to certain misunderstandings. If 'to create' is synonymous with 'to make from nothing', according to the unanimously admitted though perhaps insufficiently explicit definition, it is assuredly necessary to understand thereby, above all, a nothing that is exterior to the Principle; in other words, in order to be a 'creator', the Principle must be sufficient unto itself and not need to resort to some sort of 'substance' situated outside of itself and having a more or less independent existence—which, to tell the truth, is inconceivable in any case. One sees immediately that the first purpose of such a formulation is to affirm expressly that the Principle is not in the least a mere 'Demiurge' (and here is not the place to distinguish whether this is a question of the supreme Principle or of Being, for it is equally true in both cases); however this does not necessarily mean that every 'demiurgic' conception is basically false, but rather that in any case its place is on a much lower level and corresponds to a much more restricted point of view, which, located only at some secondary phase of the cosmogonic process, no longer involves the Principle in any way.[1] Now, if one is content to speak of a 'making from nothing' without any further clarification, as is usually the case, there is another danger to be avoided, which is to consider this 'nothing' as a sort of

1. See *Miscellanea*, pt. 1, chap. 1. ED.

principle, no doubt negative, but out of which manifested existence might effectively be drawn nonetheless. This would lead back to practically the same error as that which we rightly wanted to prevent by attributing to 'nothing' itself a certain 'substantiality'; and in one sense this later error would be still more serious than the earlier, for it embraces a formal contradiction consisting of giving a certain reality to 'nothing', which, ultimately, is to say, to nothingness. If, to escape this contradiction, one claims that the 'nothing' in question is not nothingness pure and simple, but only such in relation to the Principle, one would commit a double error. On one hand, it would suppose that this time there was something truly real outside of the Principle, and then there would no longer be any real difference from the 'demiurgic' concept itself; on the other hand, it would fail to recognize that in no way can beings be drawn from this relative 'nothing' by manifestation, as the finite never ceases to be strictly null vis-à-vis the Infinite.

Something completely essential is lacking in the way manifestation is being considered, both in what has just been said as well as in what could be added concerning the idea of creation, and this is the notion of possibility. However, and note this well, this by no means constitutes a ground for complaint, and such a view, however incomplete, is no less legitimate, for in truth the notion of possibility intervenes only when one places oneself at the metaphysical point of view, and as we have already said, it is not from this point of view that manifestation is envisaged as creation. Metaphysically, manifestation necessarily presupposes certain possibilities capable of being manifested; but if it proceeds thus from possibility, one cannot say that it comes from 'nothing', for it is obvious that possibility is not 'nothing'. But perhaps one may object that this is then precisely contrary to the idea of creation. The answer is easy: all possibilities are contained in total Possibility, which is but one with the Principle itself; it is thus ultimately in this latter that the possibilities are really contained in a permanent state and for all eternity; and, besides, if it were otherwise they would truly be 'nothing', and there could no longer even be a question of possibilities. Thus, if manifestation proceeds from these possibilities or from some of them (here we recall that besides the possibilities of manifestation

there are also possibilities of non-manifestation to consider, at least in the supreme Principle, although this is no longer so when we limit ourselves to Being), it comes from nothing that is outside of the Principle; and this is exactly the meaning we have attached to the idea of creation understood correctly, so that fundamentally the two points of view are not only reconcilable, but even in perfect agreement. The difference consists in that the point of view related to the idea of creation considers nothing beyond manifestation, or at least only considers the Principle without probing further, because it is still only a relative point of view, whereas from the metaphysical point of view, on the contrary, it is what is inside the Principle, that is to say possibility, that is really what is essential and matters much more than manifestation itself.

On the whole, one could say that these are two different expressions of the same truth, on condition, of course, that we add that these expressions correspond to two aspects or two points of view which themselves are truly different; but then one could ask whether the one that is the more complete and the more profound would not be fully sufficient, and what purpose the other serves. It is first of all and in a general way the same purpose as that of any exoteric point of view, insofar as it is a formulation of traditional truths limited to what is both indispensable and accessible to all men without distinction. On the other hand, regarding the special case in question, there may be motives of 'opportuneness' as it were, particular to certain traditional forms by reason of the contingent circumstances to which they must be adapted and which require a formal safeguard against a conception of the origin of manifestation in a 'demiurgic' mode, whereas such a precaution would be completely useless elsewhere. However, when one observes that the idea of creation is strictly bound up with the properly religious point of view, one is perhaps led to think that there must be something more in it than this; and this is what we must now examine, even if it is not possible to enter into all the developments to which this side of the question might give rise.

Whether it is a question of manifestation considered metaphysically, or of creation, the complete dependence of manifested beings in all that they really are with respect to the Principle is affirmed

quite as clearly and expressly in the one case as in the other; only when this dependence is envisaged in a more precise way does the characteristic difference appear, corresponding very strictly to the difference between the two points of view. From the metaphysical point of view, this dependence is at the same time a 'participation': since all reality lies in the Principle, beings participate in this Principle to the extent that they bear reality within themselves; moreover, it is no less true that these beings, insofar as they are contingent and limited—as is all manifestation of which they are a part—are null with respect to the Principle, as we said above; but in this participation there is a sort of link with the Principle, and therefore a link between the manifested and the non-manifested, which enables beings to pass beyond the relative condition inherent in manifestation. The religious point of view, by contrast, insists more on the nullity proper to manifested beings, because by its very nature it does not have to take them beyond that condition; and it implies the consideration of dependence under an aspect which corresponds practically to the attitude of *al-ubūdiyah,* to use the Arabic term which the ordinary sense of 'servitude' no doubt renders somewhat imperfectly in this specifically religious sense, but sufficiently enough, nonetheless, to serve better than would the word 'adoration' (which, moreover, corresponds rather to another [Arabic] term with the same root, *al-ibādah);* now the state of '*abd*, thus envisaged, is properly that of the 'creature' vis-à-vis the 'Creator.'

Since we have borrowed a term from the language of the Islamic tradition, we should add that no one would dare contest the fact that Islam, considered in its religious or exoteric aspect, is any less 'creationist' than Christianity; however, this in no way prevents its esoteric aspect from having a certain level beyond which the idea of creation disappears. Thus there is an aphorism according to which 'the Sufi [and it should indeed be noted here that it is not a question here of the mere *mutaṣawwuf*] is not created' (*as-Sufi lam yukhlaq*); this amounts to saying that his state is beyond the condition of 'creature', and indeed, insofar as he has realized the 'Supreme Identity' and so is actually identified with the Principle or the Uncreated, he himself necessarily can only be uncreated. Here, the religious point of view is no less necessarily surpassed, giving way to

the purely metaphysical point of view; but if both can thus coexist in the same tradition, each in the rank proper to it and in its proper domain, this obviously proves quite clearly that they are not opposed or contradictory to each other in any way.

We know that there cannot be any real contradiction, whether within a tradition or between it and other traditions, since within them all there can only be diverse expressions of the one Truth. If someone believes that he sees apparent contradictions, should we not simply conclude that there is something that he understands amiss or incompletely, rather than impute to the traditional doctrines themselves flaws which, in reality, only exist because of his own intellectual insufficiency?

10

TAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM

For the most part, ancient peoples bothered little about establishing a strict chronology for their history; some even used only symbolic numbers, at least for the most remote epochs, and we would be seriously mistaken in taking these as dates in the ordinary and literal sense of that word. In this respect, however, the Chinese constitute a remarkable exception and are perhaps the only people to have taken constant care, from the very origin of their tradition, to date their annals by means of precise astronomical observations, including the description of the state of the heavens at the moment when the events recorded took place. Thus we can be more definite regarding China and its ancient history than in many other cases, and know that the tradition we may properly call Chinese originated around 3,700 years before the Christian era. By a rather curious coincidence, this same epoch is also the beginning of the Hebrew era, although for this latter it would be difficult to say what event really marks its starting-point.

However remote such an origin may appear when one compares it with that of the Greco-Roman civilization and with the dates of so-called 'classical' antiquity, it is in fact still fairly recent. What was the state of the yellow race, which at that time probably inhabited certain regions of central Asia, before 3,700 BC? In the absence of sufficiently explicit data it is impossible to say with any precision; it seems that for an indeterminate length of time this race went through a period of obscurity, and was roused from this slumber at a moment also marked by changes important for other sectors of

humanity. It is then possible—and indeed is the only thing that can be affirmed outright—that what appears as a beginning may in reality have been the awakening of a much earlier tradition, which, moreover, had to be put in another form at that time to adapt to new conditions. However that may be, the history of China, or of what is so named today, only begins with Fu-Hsi, who is regarded as its first emperor; and it must immediately be added that the name of Fu-Hsi, to which is linked the whole body of sciences that make up the very essence of the Chinese tradition, in reality seems to designate a whole period lasting for several centuries.

To fix the principles of the tradition, Fu-Hsi made use of linear symbols that were both simple and at the same time as synthetic as possible, that is, the continuous line and the broken line, respectively signs of *yang* and *yin*, that is, of the two principles, active and passive, which, proceeding from a sort of polarization of the supreme metaphysical Unity, give birth to the whole of universal manifestation. From the combinations of these two signs in all their possible arrangements, are formed the eight *kua* or 'trigrams', which have always remained the fundamental symbols of the Far-Eastern tradition. It is said that 'before tracing the trigrams, Fu-Hsi looked at the Heaven, then lowered his eyes to the Earth, observed its details, considered the characteristics of the human body and of all external things.'[1] This text is especially interesting in that it contains the formal expression of the 'Great Triad': Heaven and Earth, or the two complementary principles from which all beings spring, and man, who, by his nature partaking of both, is the middle term of the triad, the mediator between Heaven and Earth.[2] Here we should specify that we refer to 'true man', that is, he who having reached the full development of his higher faculties 'can assist Heaven and Earth in the maintenance and transformation of beings, and by that very fact constitute a third power along with Heaven and Earth.'[3] It is also said that Fu-Hsi saw a dragon emerge from the river, uniting in itself the powers of Heaven and Earth, and bearing the trigrams

1. *The Book of the Rites of the Kingdom of Chou.*
2. See *The Great Triad*, especially chap. 3. ED.
3. *Ch'ung Yung*, chap. 22.

inscribed on its back, which is another way of expressing the same thing symbolically.

Thus the whole tradition was first contained essentially and as if in germ in the trigrams, symbols marvelously adapted to serving as support for an indefinitude of possibilities; it only remained to draw from them all the necessary developments, whether in the domain of pure metaphysical knowledge itself, or in its diverse applications to the cosmic and human orders. To this end Fu-Hsi wrote three books, of which only the last, the *I Ching*, or 'Book of Changes', has survived. The text of this book is so synthetic that it can be understood in many senses, nonetheless perfectly concordant among themselves, according to whether one keeps strictly to the principles themselves or applies them to this or that determinate order. Thus, besides the metaphysical sense, there are a multitude of contingent applications of unequal importance which constitute as many traditional sciences. In this way it can be applied to logic, mathematics, astronomy, physiology, social organization, and so on; and there is even a divinatory application, which, however, is considered the most inferior of all, and the practice of which is left to wandering minstrels. Besides, it is characteristic of all traditional doctrines that from the outset they contain within themselves the possibilities of all conceivable developments, including those of an indefinite variety of sciences of which the modern West has not the slightest idea, and of all the adaptations that might be required by later circumstances. There is thus no cause to be astonished that the teachings contained in the *I Ching*, which Fu-Hsi himself claimed to have drawn from a past very ancient and difficult to date, should in turn have become the common basis of the two doctrines in which the Chinese tradition has been maintained to the present, and which, by reason of the completely different domains to which they relate, seem at first sight to have no point of contact, namely Taoism and Confucianism.

What were the circumstances that after roughly three thousand years rendered a readaptation of the traditional doctrine necessary, that is to say, a change not in the foundation, which in itself always remained strictly the same, but as it were in the forms into which this doctrine was incorporated? This is another point that it would doubtless be difficult to elucidate fully, for in China and elsewhere

such things scarcely leave a trace in recorded history, where exterior effects are much more apparent than the profound causes. What seems certain in any case is that the doctrine such as it had been formulated in the time of Fu-Hsi had generally ceased to be understood in its most essential aspects; and doubtless, too, the applications which had been drawn from it in the past, especially concerning social matters, no longer corresponded to the racial conditions of existence, which must have been changed perceptibly in the interval.

It was then the sixth century before the Christian era, and it is notable that this century saw considerable change among almost all peoples, so that it would seem that what happened in China at that time should be attributed to a cause, perhaps difficult to define, that affected the whole of terrestrial humanity. What is remarkable is that in a general way the sixth century can be considered as the beginning of the properly 'historical' period. When one goes farther back, it is impossible to establish even an approximate chronology, except in a few exceptional cases, as, for example, precisely that of China. On the other hand, beginning with this epoch, dates of events are everywhere known with a fair degree of accuracy, which is assuredly a fact deserving our attention. Moreover, the changes that took place at the time present different characteristics according to the country. India, for instance, saw the birth of Buddhism, that is, a revolt against the traditional spirit going as far as the negation of all authority, even to veritable anarchy in the intellectual and social orders;[4] in China, on the contrary, the two new doctrinal

4. Guénon later revised his views on Buddhism, largely through the influence of A.K. Coomaraswamy and Marco Pallis. In his last revision of *The Crisis of the Modern World* (chap. 1, n4), in which the identical statement regarding Buddhism is found, Guénon added the following note: 'The question of Buddhism is by no means so simple as this brief account of it might suggest; and it is interesting to note that if, as far as their own tradition is concerned, the Hindus have always condemned the Buddhists, this is not the case with the Buddha himself, for whom many of them have a great reverence, some going so far as to see in him the ninth *Avatāra*. As for Buddhism such as it is known today, one should be careful, in dealing with it, to distinguish between its *Mahāyāna* and its *Hīnayāna* forms, that is, between the 'Greater' and the 'Lesser' Vehicles; in general one may say that Buddhism outside India differs markedly from the original Indian form, which began to lose ground rapidly after the death of Ashoka and eventually disappeared.' Ed.

forms, which were given the names Taoism and Confucianism, were constituted simultaneously and strictly within the line of tradition.

The founders of these two doctrines, Lao Tzu and Kung Tzu (whom Westerners call Confucius) were thus in fact contemporaries, and history tells us that one day they met:

> 'Hast thou discovered Tao?' asked Lao Tzu. 'I have sought it twenty-seven years,' replied Kung Tzu 'and I have not yet found it.' Whereupon Lao Tzu gave his visitor these few precepts. 'The sage loves obscurity; he does not throw himself at every comer; he studies times and circumstances. If the moment is propitious, he speaks; otherwise, he keeps silent. Whoever possesses a treasure does not display it before the whole world; in the same way, one who is truly a sage does not unveil his wisdom to the whole world. That is all I have to say to you; make what profit you can out of it!' On returning from this interview Kung Tzu said, 'I have seen Lao Tzu; he is like the dragon. As for the dragon, I know not how it can be borne by winds and clouds and raise itself to Heaven.

This anecdote, reported by the historian Ssu-Ma-Chi'en, perfectly delineates the respective positions of the two doctrines, or rather of the two branches of the doctrine, into which the Far-Eastern tradition would henceforth be divided: the one essentially consisting of pure metaphysics, to which are joined all the traditional sciences of which the scope is strictly speaking speculative, or rather 'cognitive'; the other, confined to the practical domain and keeping exclusively to the field of social applications. Kung Tzu himself admitted that he was not at all 'born to Knowledge', that is, that he had not attained to knowledge par excellence, which is that of the metaphysical and supra-rational order; he was acquainted with traditional symbols, but he had not penetrated their deepest meaning. That is why his work was necessarily to be limited to one particular and contingent domain, which alone was within his competence; but at least he was careful not to deny what lay beyond his understanding. His later disciples did not always imitate him in this, and at times some of then exhibited a narrow exclusivism—a defect widespread among 'specialists' of all kinds—and this brought forth various ripostes of

scathing irony on the part of the great Taoist commentators of the fourth century such as Lieh Tzu, and more especially Chuang Tzu. However, it must not be inferred from such disputes that Taoism and Confucianism are rival schools, for this they never were and never could be, since each has its proper and clearly distinct domain. Their co-existence is thus perfectly normal and regular, and in some respects their distinction corresponds fairly exactly to what in other civilizations is that between the spiritual authority and the temporal power.

We have already said, moreover, that the two doctrines share a common root, namely the earlier tradition. Neither Kung Tzu nor Lao Tzu ever intended to expound conceptions of their own, which, as such, would have lacked all authority and any real influence. 'I am a man who has loved the ancients and who has bent all his efforts toward acquiring their sciences,' said Kung Tzu;[5] and this attitude, which is the very opposite of the individualism of modern Westerners with their pretensions to 'originality' at any cost, is the only one compatible with the establishment of a traditional civilization. The word 'readaptation' which we have used before is therefore the one that indeed fits here; and the social institutions that resulted from it were endowed with a remarkable stability, for they lasted twenty-five centuries and survived all the periods of disorder that China underwent until recently. We have no wish to dwell further on these institutions, which moreover are fairly well-known in broad outline; but it is worth recalling that their essential characteristic is to take the family as foundation and from there to extend itself to the race, which is the totality of families belonging to one and the same original stock. One of the special characteristics of the Chinese civilization is in fact that it is founded on the idea of race and the solidarity that unites its members among themselves, whereas other civilizations, which generally include men belonging to diverse or poorly-defined races, rest on completely different principles of unity.

Usually when one speaks in the West of China and its doctrines, it is almost exclusively Confucianism that comes to mind. This is not to say that it is always interpreted correctly, for some make of it a

5. *Liun-Yu*, chap. 7.

kind of Eastern 'positivism', whereas in reality it is something totally different, first by reason of its traditional character, and then also because, as we have said, it is an application of superior principles, whereas 'positivism', on the contrary, implies a negation of such principles. As for Taoism, it is generally passed over in silence, and many seem to be ignorant of its very existence, or at any rate to believe that it disappeared long ago and today presents only an historical or archaeological interest. In what follows, we shall see the reasons for this mistake.

Lao Tzu wrote only one treatise, which, moreover, was extremely concise, called the *Tao Te Ching* or 'Book of the Way and of Rectitude'; all other Taoist texts are either commentaries on this fundamental book or later versions of various complementary teachings that originally had been purely oral. The *Tao*, which is translated literally as 'Way', and which gave its name to the doctrine itself, is the supreme Principle envisaged from a strictly metaphysical standpoint; it is both the origin and the end of all beings, as is very clearly indicated by the ideographic character that represents it. The *Te*—which we prefer to render as 'Rectitude' rather than 'Virtue', as is sometimes done, so as not to seem to give it a 'moral' meaning that is not at all in keeping with the outlook of Taoism—is what could be called a 'specification' of the *Tao* with respect to a determinate being, such as the human being for instance; it is the direction which that being must follow in order that its existence in its present state shall be according to the Way, or, in other words, in conformity with the Principle. Thus, at the outset Lao Tzu takes his stand in the universal order and then descends to an application; but although this application is specifically made to the case of man, it is in no way done from a social or moral point of view; what is always and exclusively envisaged is the connection with the Supreme Principle, so that in reality we never leave the metaphysical domain.

Consequently Taoism does not attribute importance to outward action, which it ultimately holds as unimportant, and it expressly teaches the doctrine of 'non-action'. In general, Westerners have some difficulty grasping this doctrine in its true significance, but they could be helped by recalling the Aristotelian theory of the 'unmoved mover' which has essentially the same meaning, but from

which they never seem to have drawn all the consequences. 'Non-action' is not inertia, but on the contrary implies the fullness of activity, but an activity that is transcendent and altogether interior, non-manifested, in union with the Principle, and thus beyond all the distinctions and appearances that most people mistakenly take for reality itself, whereas they are only more or less distant reflections of it. Moreover, we should also note that Confucianism itself, though its point of view is that of action, nonetheless speaks of the 'invariable middle', that is, of the state of perfect equilibrium shielded from the incessant vicissitudes of the outer world. Now in the case of Confucianism this can only be the expression of a purely theoretical ideal, and in its contingent realm it can at most grasp a mere image of true 'non-action', whereas for Taoism it is a question of something altogether different, namely, a fully effective realization of this transcendent state. Placed at the center of the cosmic wheel, the perfect sage moves it invisibly by his presence alone, without participating in its movement and untroubled by the need to exercise any action whatsoever; his absolute detachment makes him master of all things because he can no longer be affected by anything.

> He has attained such perfect impassibility, for him life and death are alike indifferent, and the collapse of the world would move him not at all. By penetration he has reached the Immutable Truth, the Knowledge of the One Universal Principle. He lets all the beings roll on according to their destinies, while himself he keeps to the Immobile Center of all destinies.... The outward sign of this inner state is imperturbability, not that of the warrior who for love of glory swoops down upon an army ranged in battle, but that of the spirit, superior to Heaven, to Earth, and to all beings, who dwells in a body for which he cares not, taking no account of the images perceived by his senses and knowing all, in his immobile unity, by a knowledge all-embracing. This absolutely independent spirit is the master of men; if it pleased him to summon them all together, all would run to his bidding on the day appointed; but he does not care to be served.[6]

6. *Chuang Tzu*, chap. 5.

> If a true sage, much in spite of himself, had to take charge of an empire, keeping himself to non-action, he would make use of the leisure of his non-intervention by giving free rein to his natural propensities. The empire would prosper for having been put in the hands of this man. Without bringing his faculties into play, without using his bodily senses, seated motionless, he would behold all with his transcendent eye; absorbed in contemplation, he would shake all like thunder; the sky would conform obediently to the motions of his spirit; all beings would follow the impulse of his non-intervention, as dust follows the wind. Why should this man seek to guide the empire, when letting it go on is enough?[7]

We have insisted particularly on this doctrine of 'non-action', for besides the fact that it is one of the most important and most characteristic aspects of Taoism, there are other more particular reasons for doing so that will be better understood from what follows. But one question that arises is this: how can one attain the state described as that of the perfect sage? Here, as in all analogous doctrines found in other civilizations, the answer is very clear. One attains it exclusively through knowledge, but this knowledge, which Kung Tzu admitted to never having obtained, is of an order altogether different from ordinary or 'profane' knowledge, and has no connection whatsoever with the exterior learning of the 'scholars', and even less so with science as understood by modern Westerners. This is not a case of incompatibility, although, by reason of the barriers which it sets and of the mental habits it imposes, ordinary science may often be an obstacle to the acquisition of true knowledge; but whoever possesses the latter is bound to hold as negligible the relative and contingent speculations with which most men rest content, the detailed analyses and researches in which they lose themselves, and the many divergent opinions that inevitably result.

> Philosophers lose themselves in their speculations, sophists in their distinctions, investigators in their researches. All these men

7. Ibid., chap. II.

> are caught within the limits of space and blinded by particular beings.[8]

The sage, on the contrary, has passed beyond all the distinctions inherent in external points of view; at the central point where he abides, all opposition has disappeared, having been resolved into a perfect equilibrium.

> In the primordial state, these oppositions did not exist. They all derived from the diversity of beings and from their contacts caused by the universal gyration. They would cease, if difference and motion were to cease. They cease at once to affect the being that has reduced his distinct individuality and his particular motion to almost nothing. This being no longer enters into conflict with any other being, for he is established in the infinite, effaced in the indefinite. He has reached the point from which start all transformations, wherein are no conflicts, and there he abides. By concentrating his nature, by nourishing his vital spirit, by bringing together all his powers, he is united to the principle of all births. Inasmuch as his nature is whole, and his vital spirit intact, no being can harm him.[9]

It is for this reason and not from any kind of scepticism, which is obviously excluded by the degree of knowledge he has attained, that the sage keeps himself entirely outside of all discussions that agitate the generality of men; for him, in fact, all contrary opinions are equally valueless, because, by very reason of their opposition, they are all equally relative.

> His own viewpoint is one where this and that, yes and no, seem still to be undistinguished. This point is the hinge of the norm; it is the immobile center of a circumference on whose contours all contingencies, distinctions, and individualities roll; whence one sees only one infinity, which is neither this nor that, neither yes nor no. To see everything in as yet undifferentiated primordial unity, or from such a distance that all dissolves into one, is true

8. Ibid., chap. 24.
9. Ibid., chap. 19.

intelligence. Let us not busy ourselves with distinguishing, but let us see everything in the unity of the norm. Let us not debate in order to get the better, but let us use, toward others, the method of the monkey-trainer. This man said to the monkeys he was training: 'I will give you three taros in the morning and four in the evening.' But not one of the monkeys was satisfied. 'So be it,' said he, 'I will give you four in the morning and three in the evening.' All the monkeys were satisfied. Thus not only did he satisfy them, but also he gave them only the seven taros a day which he had intended for them in the first place. Thus does the sage; he says yes and no, for the sake of peace, and remains calm at the center of the Universal Wheel, indifferent as to the direction of its turning.[10]

We need hardly say that the state of the perfect sage with all that this implies (which we cannot discuss at length here), cannot be attained at one stroke, and that even the degrees inferior to this state, which are as it were so many preliminary stages, are only accessible at the price of efforts of which very few men are capable. The methods employed to this end by Taoism are, moreover, particularly difficult to follow, and the help they furnish is much more restricted than that found in the traditional teaching of other civilizations such as India, for example; they are in any case almost impracticable for men belonging to races other than that for which they are particularly adapted. Moreover, even in China, Taoism has never been very widespread, nor has it ever sought to be, having always abstained from propagandizing since its very nature imposes this reserve on it; it is a very closed and essentially 'initiatic' doctrine, which as such is destined for an elite only, and could not be propounded to everyone without distinction, for not all are suited to understand it, and still fewer to 'realize' it. It is said that Lao Tzu entrusted his teaching to two disciples only, who themselves instructed ten others; after writing the *Tao Te Ching*, he disappeared toward the West, doubtless taking refuge in some almost inaccessible retreat in Tibet or the Himalayas, and, says the historian Ssu-Ma-Chi'en, 'no one knows how or where he ended his days.'

10. Ibid., chap. 2.

The doctrine common to all, and which everyone must study and put into practice according to his capacity, is Confucianism, which, embracing everything to do with social relations, is fully sufficient for the needs of ordinary life. However, since Taoism represents principial knowledge from which all the rest derives, in a way Confucianism is really only an application thereof to a contingent order and is by right subordinate by its very nature; but this is something that need not concern the masses and that they may not even suspect since only the practical application falls within their intellectual horizon; and the masses we speak of certainly include the great majority of Confucian 'scholars' themselves. All questions of form aside, this *de facto* separation between Taoism and Confucianism, between the inner and the outer doctrine, constitute one of the most notable differences between the civilizations of China and India; the latter has only one body of unified doctrine, namely Brahmānism, which includes both the principle and all its applications, so that there is no break in continuity from the lowest to the highest degrees. To a great extent this difference reflects the mental conditions of the two peoples; however, it is very probable that the continuity that has been maintained in India, and no doubt in India alone, also formerly existed in China, from the epoch of Fu-Hsi up to that of Lao Tzu and Kung Tzu.

It is now clear why Taoism is so little known to Westerners; outwardly it is unlike Confucianism, which has visible effects on all circumstances of social life; rather it is the exclusive attribute of an elite perhaps fewer in number today than ever before, which in no way seeks to communicate to outsiders the doctrine of which it is the guardian; finally, its very point of view, its mode of expression, and its methods of teaching are as foreign as possible to the spirit of the modern West. Some people, while aware of the existence of Taoism and admitting that it is still living, nevertheless imagine that its influence on the whole of Chinese civilization is practically negligible, if not altogether null, because of its closed character; this again is a grave error, and it now remains for us to explain the true situation as far as possible.

Referring back to the texts quoted above concerning 'non-action', it will be readily understood, at least in principle if not in the modalities of its application, that the role of Taoism must be one of

invisible direction, dominating events rather than taking part in them directly, and all the more efficacious for not being clearly evident in exterior movements. As stated above, Taoism fulfills the function of the 'unmoved mover'; it does not seek to interfere in action, and is even entirely uninterested in it insofar as it sees in action a mere momentary and transitory modification, an infinitesimal element of the 'current of forms', a point on the circumference of the 'cosmic wheel'. Taoism, on the other hand, is like the pivot around which the wheel turns, or the norm by which its motion is regulated, precisely because it does not participate in that movement, and this is so even without express intervention on its part. Everything that is carried along in the revolutions of the wheel changes and passes; only that remains which, being united with the Principle, abides invariably at the center, immovable as the Principle itself; and the center, which nothing can affect in its undifferentiated unity, is the starting-point of the indefinite multitude of modifications that constitute universal manifestation.

Since the perfect sage is the only being actually to have reached the center, we should immediately add that what we have just said regarding his state and function applies in all strictness only to the supreme degree of the Taoist hierarchy; the other degrees are like intermediaries between the center and the outer world, and, just as the spokes of a wheel start from the hub and join it to the circumference, so these degrees assure the uninterrupted transmission of influence emanating from the invariable point where 'non-acting action' resides. The word 'influence', and not 'action', is the most suitable here, although one might also speak of an 'action of presence'; and even the lower degrees, though very far from the fullness of 'non-action', nevertheless still partake of it in a certain way. Besides, the means by which this influence is communicated necessarily escape those who only see the outside of things; they would be as unintelligible to the Western mind, and for the same reasons, as are the methods by which accession is gained to the various degrees of the hierarchy. It would thus be perfectly useless to dwell upon what are called 'temples without doors' and 'colleges without teachers', or upon the constitution of organizations that have none of the characteristics of a 'society' in the European sense of the word, and that have no definite outward form, and sometimes not even a

name, which nevertheless forge the most effective and the most indissoluble link that can exist between their members—all this would mean nothing to the Western imagination, since it is familiar with nothing that could furnish any valid term of comparison.

At the most exterior level, organizations no doubt exist that seem more comprehensible since they are engaged in the domain of action, although they may still be as secret as all the Western associations which, with more or less justification, claim to possess such a character. These organizations generally have only a temporary existence; formed for a specific purpose, they disappear without a trace as soon as their mission has been accomplished; in fact they are only emanations of other, more profound and permanent organizations from which they receive their real direction, even when their apparent leaders are entirely outside the Taoist hierarchy. Some of these leaders who played a considerable role in the distant past, have left in the popular mind memories that are expressed in legendary form; thus we have heard it said that in the past the masters of a particular secret organization would take a handful of pins and throw them on the ground, and that from them would spring so many armed soldiers. This is precisely the story of Cadmus sowing the teeth of the dragon; and these legends conceal beneath their ingenuous appearance a very real symbolic value which only the common man makes the mistake of taking literally.

It can often happen that the associations in question, or at least those that are most outward, stand in opposition to or even in conflict with one another. As a result superficial observers will not fail to object to what we have just said, and to conclude that unity of direction cannot exist in such conditions. These people will have forgotten only one thing, which is that the direction in question is 'beyond' the opposition they point to, and not in the domain in which this opposition occurs and where alone it is valid. If we had to reply to such objections, we would limit ourselves to recalling the Taoist teaching of the equivalence of the 'yes' and the 'no' in the primordial indistinction, and, as for putting this teaching into practice, we would simply refer them to the fable of the monkey-trainer.

We think we have said enough to make it understood that the real influence of Taoism can be extremely important, while yet remaining invisible and hidden; it is not only in China that things of this

sort exist, but there they seem to be in more constant use than anywhere else. It will also be understood that those who have some knowledge of the part played by this traditional organization must be wary of appearances and very reserved in assessing events such as those presently taking place in the Far East, which too often one judges by comparison with events in the West, thus placing them in a completely false light. Chinese civilization has weathered many other crises in the past, and it has always found its equilibrium again in the end; in fact, there is nothing to indicate that the present crisis is more serious than preceding ones, and even if it were, this would still be no reason for supposing that it must necessarily penetrate to that which is deepest and most essential in the tradition of the race, and which moreover a very small number of men would suffice to preserve intact in periods of trouble, for things of this order do not depend on the brute force of the multitude. Confucianism, which represents only the exterior aspect of the tradition, might even disappear should social conditions happen to change to the point of requiring the establishment of an entirely new form; but Taoism is beyond such contingencies. Let us not forget that the sage, according to the Taoist teachings we have cited, 'remains at rest at the center of the cosmic wheel,' whatever may be the circumstances, and that 'even the collapse of the universe would not cause him any emotion.'

REVIEWS

ISLAMIC ESOTERISM: BOOKS

W. B. Seabrook, *Aventures en Arabie* (Gallimard, Paris). Like the author's previous books that have been translated [into French] (*L'Île magique* and *Les Secrets de la jungle*),[1] this one stands out favorably from the usual 'travelogues', no doubt because here we are dealing with someone unencumbered with preconceived ideas, and who, above all, is not convinced that Westerners are superior to all other peoples. There is the occasional naïvité and expression of astonishment in the face of quite simple and elementary things, but this, after all, seems to us rather a guarantee of sincerity. In fact the title is a bit misleading, as the author has not actually traveled to Arabia properly speaking, but only to the regions situated immediately to the north; and in order to have done with our criticisms, let us add that the Arabic words are sometimes strangely corrupted, as if by someone who had tried to transcribe approximately the sounds that he hears but without concern for spelling, and also that some expressions are translated in a rather fanciful way. Finally, we note yet again the curious fact that in Western books intended for the 'general public', the *shahādah* is never reproduced accurately. Is this purely accidental, or is one not rather tempted to think that there is something opposed to its being pronounced by the mass of hostile, or simply indifferent, readers?

The first and longest part of the book is concerned with life among the Bedouins, and is almost entirely descriptive, which is certainly not to say that it is without interest; but the parts that follow offer something more. In particular, a section that treats of the Dervishes contains remarks by a certain Shaykh Mawlawi, of which the sense is no doubt faithfully reproduced. Thus, in order to dispel the incomprehension that the author displays concerning certain *ṭuruq* [spiritual paths], the Shaykh explains to him that 'there is not just one narrow

1. The English originals of these three titles are *Adventures in Arabia among the Bedouins* (NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1930), *Jungle Ways* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1931), and *The Magic Island* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1929). Ed.

and direct way to God but an infinite number of paths'; it is a pity that there was no opportunity to make him understand as well that Sufism has nothing in common with pantheism or with heterodoxy... On the other hand, it is certainly heterodox sects, and quite enigmatic ones, that are treated in two other parts: the Druse and the Yezedis; and on these he offers some interesting information, though without claiming to explain everything. Regarding the Druse, one point that remains particularly obscure is the rite in which they are said to pay homage to a 'golden calf' or to a 'calf's head'; this is something that could perhaps suggest numerous connections, only a few of which the author seems to have anticipated; but he has at least understood that symbolism is not idolatry... With regard to the Yezedis, this book gives a rather different idea of them than does the discussion which we mentioned recently in another review.[2] 'Mazdaism' is no longer associated with them, and this is accurate enough as far as it goes; but the 'worship of the devil' could lead to discussions somewhat more difficult to resolve, and the true nature of the *Malak Tāwūs* remains a mystery. What is perhaps most worthy of interest, although unknown to the author, who, in spite of what he has seen cannot bring himself to believe, is what concerns the 'seven towers of the devil', which are centers from which satanic influences are projected throughout the world. That one of these towers may be situated among the Yezedis does not in any case prove that they are themselves 'satanists', but only that, like many heterodox sects, they can be used to facilitate the action of forces of which they are unaware. In this regard it is significant that the regular Yezedi priests refrain from taking part in any rites in this tower, whereas all manner of wandering magicians often spend some days there. What do the latter actually represent? In any event it is not necessary that the tower be inhabited permanently if it is nothing more than the tangible and 'localized' support of one of the centers of the 'counter-initiation', presided over by the *awliya ash-Shaytān*; and the latter, in establishing these seven centers, claim to oppose the influence of the seven *Aqtāb* or terrestrial 'Poles' subordinated to the supreme 'Pole', although this opposition can be no more than illusory since the spiritual domain is necessarily closed to the 'counter-initiation'.

Études Traditionnelles, 1935, pp 42–43.

2. *Études Traditionnelles*, November 1935. Ed.

KHAN SAHIB KHAJA KHAN [TR.]. *The Secret of Ana'l Ḥaqq* [Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965]. This book is a translation of a Persian work entitled *Irshādat al-Arifīn*, by Shaykh Muhammad Ibrahim Gazur-i-Ilahi of Shakarkote, but rearranged into chapters according to subject in order to make it more easily understood. In explaining his intentions, the author unfortunately speaks of a 'propagandizing of the esoteric teachings of Islam', as if esoterism could lend itself to propaganda of any kind. If such was really his aim, it cannot be said that he has succeeded, for readers who have no previous knowledge of *taṣawwuf* will doubtless have much difficulty in uncovering the true meaning in an English expression [Sufi] which all too often is used inaccurately. This defect, plus his transcription of Arabic citations in a way that strangely distorts them, is most regrettable, because, for those who already know what is involved, this book contains things of the greatest interest. The central point of these teachings is the doctrine of the 'Supreme Identity', as the title of the work indicates. The only drawback to this title is that it seems to link the doctrine to one particular expression, that of al-Ḥallāj, whereas nothing of the sort appears in the text itself. This doctrine illuminates and coordinates as it were all the considerations relating to the different subjects dealt with, such as the degrees of Existence, the divine attributes, *al-fanā'* and *al-baqā'*, the methods and the stages of initiatic development, and many other matters. This work can be recommended, not to those toward whom any 'propaganda' could be addressed—which, in any case, would completely miss the point—but on the contrary to those who already possess sufficient knowledge to derive a real benefit from it.

Études Traditionnelles, 1937, p266.

EDWARD JABRA JURJI. *Illumination in Islamic Mysticism: a translation, with an introduction and notes, based upon a critical edition of Abu-al-Mawahib al-Shādhili's treatise, entitled Qawānīn Hikam al-Ishrāq* [Lahore: Sind Sagar Academy, 1974]. The expression 'Islamic mysticism' made fashionable by [Richard] Nicholson and other orientalists, is most unfortunately inaccurate, as we have already explained on various occasions, for what is really at issue is *taṣawwuf*, which is something of the essentially initiatic order, not the mystical. Moreover, the author of this book seems to follow Western 'authorities' all

too readily, which at times leads him to say some rather odd things, for example that 'it is now established' that Sufism has such and such a character, as if one were studying some ancient doctrine that has long since disappeared; but Sufism exists in the present and consequently can still be known at first hand, so that there is nothing to 'establish' on its account. Similarly, it is at once naïve and outrageous to say that 'some members of the Shādhilite fraternity have recently been observed in Syria'; we should have thought it well-known that this *ṭarīqah*, in one or another of its numerous branches, was more or less widespread in all the Islamic countries, and all the more so since it has certainly never thought of concealing itself; but this untoward 'observation' might legitimately lead one to wonder what singular sort of espionage certain orientalists may be engaged in! There are some 'nuances' here which will probably escape American or European readers, but we should have thought that a Syrian, even if Christian, is all the same *ibn al-Arab*, and should have had a little more Eastern 'sensibility'... To come to other more important points, it is regrettable that the author accepts the theory of 'borrowings' and of 'syncretism'. If it is 'difficult to determine the beginning of Sufism in Islam,' it is because traditionally it has not and cannot have any other beginning than that of Islam itself. It is in such matters that it is advisable to be wary of the abuses of the modern 'historical method'.

On the other hand, the doctrine of *ishrāqiyah*, in the proper sense of the word, represents only a rather special point of view, that of a school linked principally to Abul-Futūh as-Suhrawardi (not to be confused with the founder of the *ṭarīqah* that bears the same name), a school which cannot be regarded as entirely orthodox, and to which some even deny any real link with *taṣawwuf*, even through deviation, considering it rather as simply 'philosophical'. It is rather astonishing that some people claim that it goes back to Muḥyi 'd-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī himself, and it is no less astonishing that they should wish to have the Shādhilite *ṭarīqah* derive from it, however indirectly. When one comes across the word *ishrāq*, as in the treatise translated here, one cannot conclude from this that the *ishrāqiyah* doctrine is involved, any more than, wherever its Western equivalent, 'illumination', is found, one is entitled to speak of 'illuminism'. This should make it all the more clear that an idea like that of *tawḥīd* was not 'derived' from this particular doctrine, for it is an idea that is absolutely essential to Islam in general, even in its exoteric aspect (there is a branch of

studies designated as *'ilm at-tawḥīd* among the *ulūm az-zāher*, that is to say the sciences which are publicly taught in Islamic universities). In short, the entire introduction to the book is based on a misunderstanding caused by the use of the word *ishrāq*; but the content of the treatise itself in no way justifies such an interpretation, for in reality there is nothing to be found here but perfectly orthodox *taṣawwuf*. Fortunately, the quality of the translated text itself, which is the most important part of the book, far exceeds that of the observations preceding it, and although the absence of the original makes it difficult to fully verify its accuracy, one can nonetheless get an adequate sense of it from the inclusion of a large number of Arabic terms which are generally very well rendered, although some call for certain reservations, however. Thus *mukāshafah* is not properly 'revelation' but rather 'intuition'; more precisely, it is a perception of the subtle order (*mulātafah*, here translated rather extraordinarily as *amiability*), inferior to pure contemplation (*mushāhadah*), at least when the word is taken in its strict sense. We cannot understand the translation of *muthūl*, which essentially implies the idea of 'similitude', as *attendance*, the more so as *ālam al muthūl* is normally the 'world of archetypes'; *baqā* is 'permanence' rather than 'subsistence'; *dīn* cannot be rendered as 'faith', which in Arabic is *imān*; *kanz al-asrār ar-rabbāniyah* is not 'the secrets of the divine treasure' (which would be *asrār al-kanz al-ilāhī*), but 'the treasure of the dominical secrets', (in the 'technical' terminology there is an important difference between *ilāhī* and *rabbānī*). One could doubtless find more inaccuracies of this kind, but on the whole they are trifling, and since the treatise is of unquestionable interest, the book, excepting its introduction, can certainly be recommended to all who study Islamic esoterism.

Études Traditionnelles, 1940, pp166–168.

Émile Dermenghem. *Contes Kabyles* (Algeria: Charlot, 1945). What we find particularly interesting in this collection of 'popular tales' from North Africa are the introduction and accompanying notes in which some general considerations on the nature of 'universal folklore' are set forth. The author quite rightly points out that 'the true interest of popular literature does not lie in questions of external relationship, influence, or dependence,' but above all in what they bear witness to 'in favor of the unity of the traditions.' He brings out the

insufficiency of the 'rationalist and evolutionist' view to which most folklorists and ethnologists, with their theories on 'seasonal rites' and other things of the kind, subscribe; and his comments on the specifically symbolic meaning of the tales and the truly 'transcendent' character of their contents recall various observations we ourselves and some of our collaborators have set forth in these pages. All the same, it is to be regretted that in spite of this he felt it necessary to devote so much space to ideas that are hardly compatible with this viewpoint; one must choose between so-called 'seasonal rites' and initiatic rites, or between the so-called 'tribal initiation' of the ethnologists and true initiation. Even if it is true and normal that esoterism has its reflection and its correspondence in the exoteric side of tradition, one must still avoid putting the principle and its secondary applications on the same plane, and in the present instance one must also consider these applications completely apart from the anti-traditional ideas of our contemporaries regarding 'primitive societies'; on the other hand, what can one say of the psychoanalytic interpretation, which ultimately denies the 'superconscious' by purely and simply conflating it with the 'subconscious'? Let us say again that initiation, understood in its true sense, has not and could not have anything 'mystical' about it; it is particularly regrettable to see this equivocation perpetuated in spite of all the explanations we have given on this subject...

Above all, the accompanying notes and commentaries exhibit the many similarities between the tales of the Kabyles and those of other and very diverse countries, and it is hardly necessary to say that these parallels are of particular interest as 'illustrations' of the universality of folklore. A final note deals with the opening and closing formulas of these tales, which obviously correspond in a general way to those marking the beginning and ending of a rite, and which, as we have explained elsewhere, are related to the 'coagulation' and 'solution' of the Hermeticists. As for the tales themselves, they seem to have been rendered as faithfully as a translation allows, and make for very pleasant reading.

Émile Dermenghem, *Le Mythe de Psyché dans le folklore nord-africain* (Algeria: Société Historique Algérienne, [n.d.]). This is yet another folkloric study in which the principal features of the well-known myth of Psyche are found, joined or scattered in various ways,

in numerous tales from North Africa and many other countries. As the author says, 'not a single one of these features fails to suggest an initiatic and ritual meaning, nor is there one that cannot be traced to the body of universal folklore.' There are also variants, of which the most remarkable is 'the inversion by which the mystical is given a feminine form.' Tales of this type 'seem to insist on the active side, the conquering side, as if they represented the aspect of human effort rather that the passive and theocentric aspect,' these two aspects obviously complementing each other. Now, it is not impossible that Apuleius, who certainly did not invent the myth, may have been able to draw his inspiration from a 'popular African oral tradition' for certain details of the version that he gives in his *The Golden Ass*; it must not be forgotten, however, that representations of this myth can already be found on Greek monuments dating from several centuries earlier. But this question of 'sources' is not really very important, for the very diffusion of the myth shows that one must go much further back to find the origin, if indeed one can speak of an origin in such circumstances; besides, folklore as such can never be the starting-point of anything whatsoever, for it is, on the contrary, made up entirely of 'survivals', such in fact even being its raison d'être. On the other hand, the fact that certain features of these tales correspond to customs, interdictions, and conditions which have actually existed in connection with marriage in one or another country proves absolutely nothing against the existence of a higher meaning, a meaning from which, we would even say, these customs themselves may have been derived—always for the reason that exoterism has its principle in esoterism, so that the higher and initiatic meaning, far from being 'added on' later, is, on the contrary, that which is in reality primordial. Dermenghem's study closes with an examination of the relationship between the myth of Psyche and similar tales in the ancient mysteries, which is particularly worthy of interest, as is the evidence of certain connections with *taṣawwuf*. In this regard we will only add that similarities such as are found between the terminology of *taṣawwuf* and Platonic vocabulary should not be taken as 'borrowings', for *taṣawwuf* is properly and essentially Islamic, and resemblances of this kind do nothing more than confirm as clearly as possible the 'unanimity' of the universal tradition under all its forms.

Études Traditionnelles, 1947, pp90–91.

Henry Corbin. *Suhrawardi d'Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishrāqi)* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1939). Suhrawardi of Aleppo, who is the subject of this brochure, is often called *ash-Shaykh al-maqtūl* [the Shaykh who was killed], to distinguish him from other figures named Suhrawardi, although one does not exactly know if he was in fact killed or if he let himself starve to death in prison. The strictly historical part is conscientiously done and gives good survey of his life and works, but we have many reservations regarding certain of the author's interpretations, and regarding some of his assertions concerning supposed 'sources' of the most hypothetical sort; notably, here again we find the singular idea, which we have mentioned in a recent article, that the origin of all angelology lies in Mazdaism. In addition, the author did not known how to make the proper distinction between the doctrine of *ishrāqiyah*, which is not connected to any regular *silsilah*, and the true *taṣawwuf*; it is really rather rash to say that 'Suhrawardi is in the lineage of al-Ḥallāj' on the basis of certain outward resemblances; and one certainly cannot take one of his admirers literally when he called him 'the master of the moment', for such expressions are often used only hyperbolically. No doubt Suhrawardi must have been influenced to a certain degree by *taṣawwuf*, but basically he seems to have been inspired by Neoplatonic ideas, which he clothed in an Islamic form, and this is why his doctrine is generally regarded as truly relevant only to philosophy; but have the orientalists ever been able to understand the profound difference separating *taṣawwuf* from all philosophy? Finally, although this is really only an matter of secondary importance, we wonder why on occasion Corbin seems to have felt obliged to imitate the complicated and somewhat obscure style of Massignon to such a degree that one could confuse the two.

Études Traditionnelles, 1947, p92.

Marie-Louis Dubouloz-Laffin. *Le Bou-Mergoud, Folklore tunisien* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1944). As is indicated by the subtitle, this hefty volume, illustrated with drawings and photographs, deals especially with the 'popular beliefs and customs of Sfax and its region.' The author displays a far more 'sympathetic' spirit than is usually found in such 'inquiries'—which, it must be admitted, too often give out a false air of 'espionage'—and this is no mean

accomplishment. Moreover, this is why 'informants' are so difficult to find, and we understand well the repugnance that most people feel in replying to indiscreet questions, all the more so as they naturally cannot guess the reasons for such curiosity regarding things which for them are quite ordinary. Dubouloz-Laffin, as much in her capacity as teacher as through her more comprehensive mentality, was certainly in a better position than many to obtain satisfying results, and one can say that in general she has succeeded very well in the task she set herself. However, this is not to say that everything in this book is free from error, which is no doubt inevitable to a certain extent. In our opinion, one of the principal errors lies in her seeming to present many things that in reality are common either to all of North Africa, or even to the whole of the Islamic world, as purely regional. In addition, certain chapters dealing with the Muslim and Jewish elements of the population jumble the two together in a somewhat confusing way; it would have been useful not only to separate them clearly, but also, as concerns the Tunisian Jews, to distinguish between what belongs properly to them and what they have borrowed from their Muslim milieu. One other thing which, though assuredly only a secondary detail, nonetheless makes the reading of the book somewhat difficult, is that the Arabic words are rendered in a truly extraordinary orthography which obviously represents a local pronunciation, heard and written down very approximately. Even if one judged it appropriate to preserve these bizarre forms (although we do not see the interest this could hold), it would at least have been better to indicate on the side the correct forms as well, for as it stands some words are nearly unrecognizable. We should also like to add some remarks related more directly to the idea of folklore in general. It has become customary to incorporate very disparate things into this notion, and according to the case this may be justified, to some extent; but what seems to us quite inexplicable is that events that really occurred in known circumstances, and which can in no way be considered 'beliefs' or 'customs' are included as well. We find some instances of this kind here. For example, we do not see on what grounds a recent and duly recorded case of 'possession' or of a 'haunted house' can be associated in any way with folklore. Another peculiarity is the astonishment that Europeans always display when confronted with things which, in any context other than their own, are quite normal and everyday, so much so that they are no longer heeded. One has the impression that if they

have not had the opportunity to observe such things for themselves, they have great difficulty in believing what is told them. Traces of this frame of mind appear here and there in this book also, although it is less emphasized here than in other works of the kind. As for the contents of the book, the largest section deals first of all with the *jnoun* (*jinn*) and their various interventions in the life of humans, then with subjects more or less connected to it, magic and sorcery, to which medicine is added. The space accorded to things of this order is perhaps a bit excessive, and it is to be regretted that there is almost nothing concerning 'popular tales', which, however, are not lacking in the region studied or anywhere else, for it seems to us that this, after all, is what constitutes the very foundation of true folklore understood in its strictest sense. The final part, which is devoted to 'marabouts', is rather summary, and is certainly the least satisfying, even from the simply 'documentary' point of view. It is true that for more than one reason this subject was probably the most difficult to treat; but at least we do not find the irksome prejudice so widespread among Westerners, which insists that this is something foreign to Islam, and which even strives to discover in it vestiges of who knows what long-vanished cults, something not so difficult to do, given a dash of 'erudite' imagination.

Études Traditionnelles, 1949, pp. 45–46.

ISLAMIC ESOTERISM: ARTICLES

Les Études carmélitaines (April 1932) has published a translation of an extended article by Miguel Asìn Palacios on Ibn Abbad de Ronda, under the title 'Un précurseur hispano-musulman de Saint Jean de la Croix'. This study is interesting particularly for the numerous texts cited, and in addition is written with a sympathy from which the editors of the review apparently felt obliged to excuse themselves by a rather strange note asking that 'the reader take care not to attach too broad a meaning to the word "precursor".' So it appears that, if certain things must be said, it is not so much because they are true as because one could reproach the Church for not recognizing them and use them against her! Unfortunately, the whole of the author's exposition is marred by a major flaw, the all too frequent confusion of esoterism

with mysticism; indeed, he does not even speak of esoterism, mistaking it for mysticism purely and simply. This error is further aggravated by the use of a specifically 'ecclesiastical' language which is completely foreign to Islam in general and to Sufism in particular, and which contributes a certain impression of malaise. The *Shādhiliyah* school, to which Ibn Abbad belonged, is essentially initiatic, and if there are some external similarities with mystics such as Saint John of the Cross, in vocabulary for example, these do not preclude a profound difference in points of view. Thus the symbolism of 'night' does not have the same meaning for each, nor does the rejection of external 'powers' imply the same intentions. From the initiatic point of view, 'night' corresponds to a state of non-manifestation (which is therefore superior to the manifested states represented by 'day', the same symbolism as that in Hindu doctrine), and if 'powers' must effectively be set aside, at least as a general rule, this is because they constitute an obstacle to pure knowledge; we do not think the same holds from the mystics' point of view.

The above calls for the remark that Palacios himself is above suspicion in these matters, for he certainly cannot be held responsible for the misuse of his works by others. For some reason, *Études carmélitaines* has for some time now published articles devoted to Eastern doctrines, but what is most striking about these articles is their attempt to portray these doctrines as 'mystical', an attempt that seems to proceed from the same intentions as those found in the translation of P. Dandoy's book, which we have discussed elsewhere; and a glance at the list of contributors to this review entirely justifies this impression. If one compares such facts of the anti-oriental campaign, which are known to our readers and in which Catholic circles also play a role, one cannot avoid an initial sense of astonishment, for there seems to be some incoherence here; upon reflection, however, one begins to wonder whether a tendentious interpretation like the one in question might not itself constitute to a means of combat against the East, albeit indirectly. In any case it is greatly to be feared that an apparent sympathy may conceal some ulterior motive of proselytism and, if one may say so, of 'annexationism'. We know the Western spirit only too well not to harbor some disquiet in this regard: *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*!

Le Voile d'Isis, 1932, pp480–481.

Les Nouvelles litterairés (issue of May 27, 1933) has published an interview in the course of which ELAIN J. FILBERT indulges in some gossip regarding ourself that is as fanciful as it is offensive. We have often said what we think of these 'personal' accounts: that they have not the least interest in themselves, and that as far as doctrine is concerned, individualities count for nothing and should never obtrude; and over and above this question of principle, we think that anyone but a malefactor has an absolute right to his privacy, and that nothing of his personal affairs should be disclosed to the public without his consent. What is more, if Finbert revels in such anecdotes, he will easily find among his fellow 'men of letters' more than enough individuals whose vanity is only too well satisfied with this foolishness, that he may leave in peace those who do not find this agreeable and who have no intention of being used to 'amuse' others, whoever they may be. However repugnant it is to speak of these things, we nevertheless do so for the edification of those of our readers who may know of the interview in question, and at the very least to set to rights some of the inaccuracies (to use a euphemism) with which this preposterous account swarms. First of all, we must say that when we met him in Cairo, Finbert did not commit the gross impropriety of which he boasts; he did not ask us 'what we came to do in Egypt,' and it is well that he did not, for were it otherwise we would promptly have put him in his place! Then, since he 'addressed us in French' we replied to him likewise, and not 'in Arabic' (and furthermore, anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with us knows that we are perfectly capable of speaking 'with great dignity'!). But what is true, and we willingly admit it, is that our answer must have been 'faltering'—quite simply because, knowing the reputation our interlocutor enjoys (rightly or wrongly, is no concern of ours), we were rather embarrassed at the thought of being seen in his company; and it was precisely in order to avoid the risk of another encounter in public that we agreed to see him at the boarding-house where he was staying. If in the course of the conversation we may perhaps have happened incidentally to say a few words in Arabic, this would be nothing extraordinary; but we are absolutely certain that there was no discussion of 'brotherhoods' (whether 'closed' or not, but in any case in no way 'mystical'), for this is a subject which, for many reasons, we had no occasion to broach with Finbert. We spoke only in very vague terms of persons who possessed certain traditional knowledge, upon which he declared to us that we were giving him a glimpse

of things the existence of which he was totally unaware (and he even wrote us to this effect after his return to France). Furthermore, he did not ask us to present him to anyone, and even less to 'introduce him into the brotherhoods,' so that we did not have to refuse him; nor did he give us 'the assurance that he had been initiated (*sic*) long ago into their practices and that he was considered a Muslim among them'(!)—and for our part we are glad he told us no such thing, for had he done so, despite all the proprieties we would have been unable to restrain ourself from bursting into laughter! In what follows, when it is a question of 'popular mysticism' (Finbert seems to have a special liking for this term), of 'spiritual concerts', and other things expressed in a manner as confused as it is typically Western, we have with no great difficulty discovered just where he was able to penetrate: this is of such gravity... that one even takes the tourists there! We shall only add that in his last novel, entitled *Le Fou de Dieu* (which served as a pretext for the interview), Finbert has given the correct measure of his knowledge of the spirit of Islam: there is not one Muslim in the world, however *magzūb* and ignorant he may be, who could think of recognizing the *Mahdi* (who must in no way be a 'new prophet') in the person of a Jew... But apparently Finbert thinks (and not, alas, without some reason), that the public will be *mughaffal* enough to accept no matter what, as long as it is affirmed by 'a man who comes from the East'—but who never knew anything but its outer 'trappings'. If we had any advice to give Mr Finbert, it would be to devote himself to writing exclusively Jewish novels, where he would certainly be much more at ease, and to occupy himself no further with Islam or the East—or with ourselves! *Shuf shughulak, yā khawaja!*[3]

And here follows another story in just as good taste. Pierre Mariel, intimate friend of the 'late Mariani', has recently published in *Le Temps* a kind of serialized novel to which he has given a title far too attractive for what it is about: *L'esprit souffle où il veut* ['the spirit bloweth where it listeth'], of which the principal aim seems to be to excite various Western hatreds. We will not congratulate him for lending himself to this pretty task... nor would we have mentioned this despicable thing had he not taken advantage of the occasion to permit himself a completely gratuitous insult at our expense, which obliges

3. A common, light-hearted Arabic colloquialism meaning 'mind your own business, foreigner!' Ed.

us to make this response. First, we are under no obligation to tell him what we may or may not have been able to 'surmount', all the more so as he would understand nothing of it, but we can assure him that we nowhere play the part of a 'postulant'; second, and without in the least wishing to speak ill of the Senoussis, it is nevertheless permissible to say that it is certainly not to them that those who want 'to receive higher initiations' should apply; third, what he calls with a rather comical pleonasm 'the final degrees of the Sufi initiatic ladder' (*sic*) and even degrees that are far from being the last, are not achieved by the outer and 'human' means which he seems to suppose, but exclusively as a result of a completely interior work; and from the moment someone has been joined to the *silsilah* it is no longer in the power of anyone to prevent him from reaching all the degrees of which he is capable; fourth and finally, if there is a tradition where questions of race and origin do not in any way arise, it is certainly Islam, which in fact counts among its adherents men belonging to the most diverse races. Besides all this, one finds in this novel all the more or less inept clichés current among the European public, including the 'Crescent' and the 'green standard of the Prophet'; but then what sort of knowledge of matters pertaining to Islam could one really expect from someone who, while evidently claiming to link himself to Catholicism, knows the latter so poorly that he can speak of a 'conclave' for the nomination of new Cardinals? And it is with this 'pearl' (*margaritas ante porcos* [pearls before swine]. . . , said without irreverence to the reader) that his account ends, as if it was necessary to see there... the 'mark of the devil'!

Le Voile d'Isis, 1933, pp 434–436.

Mesures (July 1938), contains a study by Émile Dermenghem of 'L"instant" chez les mystiques et chez quelques poètes', citing numerous examples. It is perhaps to be regretted that in this exposition he has not distinguished three very different degrees more clearly: first, the higher sense of 'instant', which is properly metaphysical and initiatic and is naturally the sense found in Sufism and in Japanese *Zen* (of which *satori*, considered as a technical procedure of realization, is obviously similar to certain Taoist methods); then the meaning that it takes among mystics, already diminished or restricted in scope; and finally its more or less distant reflection, which can still be found among a few profane poets. What is essential in the 'instant' and, at

least in its first sense, gives it its profound value, is not so much its suddenness (which, moreover, is more apparent than real, since what manifests itself is in fact always the result of a prior, sometimes quite protracted, effort, the effect of which has remained latent until then) as its character of indivisibility, for it is this latter which allows its transposition into the 'intemporal', and, consequently, the transformation of a transitory state of the being into a permanent and final acquisition.

Études Traditionnelles, 1938, p423.

TAOISM

Henri Borel, *Wu Wei: fantaisie inspirée par la philosophie de Lao Tse*, translated from the Dutch by Félicia Barbier, (Paris: Aux Éditions du Monde Nouveau, 1931).[4] The first translation of this slender volume fell out of print long ago, and so we are happy to note the publication of a new translation, for under its simple appearance, and without 'erudite' pretensions, it is certainly one of the best pieces yet written on Taoism in the West. The subtitle perhaps risks doing it some harm, however. The author explains this choice on the basis of various observations which have been addressed to him, but which in our opinion he was not obliged to take into account, especially given the indifferent esteem in which for good reason he holds the more or less 'official' opinions of the sinologists. 'My only concern,' he says 'has been to keep pure the essence of the wisdom of Lao Tzu. . . . The work of Lao Tzu is not a treatise on philosophy. . . . What Lao Tzu offers us are neither forms nor materializations, but essences. My study is saturated with them; it is not the translation of them!' The work is divided into three chapters, in which, first, the very idea of the 'Tao' itself, and then its particular applications to 'Art' and 'Love' are expounded in the form of meetings with a wise old man. Lao Tzu himself never spoke of the latter two, but this adaptation, although perhaps a bit peculiar, is nonetheless legitimate since all things essentially flow from the universal Principle.

4. Published in English as *Wu Wei: A Phantasy based on the Philosophy of Lao-Tse* (NY: Theosophical Publishing, 1911). Ed.

In the first chapter, some discussions are inspired by or even partially translated from Chuang Tzu, whose commentary best illuminates the extremely concise and synthetic expressions of Lao Tzu. The author rightly thinks it impossible to translate the term 'Tao' exactly; but perhaps there are not as many objections as he believes in rendering it as 'Way', which is the literal meaning, it being understood that this is a wholly symbolic designation, and could not be otherwise no matter what word was chosen, since in reality it is something that cannot be named. But we are entirely in agreement with Borel when he protests against the interpretation that the sinologists give to the term *wu wei* which they regard as equivalent to 'inaction' or 'inertia', whereas one must see in it precisely the opposite; readers can refer to what we have said elsewhere on this subject.[5] We will only cite the following passage, which seems to us to characterize the spirit of the book quite well: 'When thou wilt come to be *wu wei*, non-acting, in the ordinary and human sense of the term, thou wilt truly *be*, and thou wilt accomplish thy vital cycle with the same absence of effort as the moving wave at our feet. Nothing will trouble thy quietude evermore. Thy sleep will be without dreams, and what will enter the field of thy consciousness will cause thee no anxiety. Thou wilt see all in the Tao, thou wilt be *one* with all that exists, and all of nature will be close to you like a friend, like thine own self. Accepting without being moved the passage from night to day, from life to death, borne along by the eternal rhythm, thou wilt enter into the Tao where nothing ever changes, whither thou shalt return as pure as thou didst leave it.' Having given this excerpt, we add that we highly recommend this book in its entirety; it makes for very enjoyable reading without in any way sacrificing its thought-provoking content.

Le Voile d'Isis, 1932, pp 604–605.

Henri Borel. *Lao Tzu's Tao and Wu Wei*, a new translation by Bhikshu Wai-Tao and Dwight Goddard (Santa Barbara: D. Goddard, 1935). This volume contains a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, of which the principal shortcoming, in our opinion, is a pervasive sentimental tinge far removed from the spirit of Taoism; perhaps this is due in part to the 'Buddhist' leanings of its authors, at least judging from their introduction. There follows a translation of the *Wu-Wei* of Henri

5. See especially *The Great Triad*. Ed.

Borel, which we have already reviewed here [see above], by M.E. Reynolds. Finally, the book ends with an historical outline of Taoism by Dr Kiang Kang-Hu, unfortunately written from a rather external point of view: to speak of 'philosophy' and 'religion' is to misunderstand completely the initiatic essence of Taoism, whether as a purely metaphysical doctrine, or even in the diverse applications which are derived from it in the order of the traditional sciences.

Le Voile d'Isis, 1936, p156.

Under the title 'Révélations sur le Boudhisme japonais', *Le Lotus bleu* (August–September issue) has published a lecture by STEINILBER-OBERLIN on the methods of spiritual development in use in the *Zen* sect (the name deriving from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, 'contemplation', and not *dziena*, which we trust represents no more than a printing error). Moreover, these methods do not seem 'extraordinary' to anyone familiar with those of Taoism, the influence of which the methods of *Zen* in large measure quite visibly reflect. Whatever is the case, it is certainly interesting; but why the grand word 'revelations', which too easily leads to the idea of a betrayal of some secret?

Le Voile d'Isis, 1932.

Le Larousse mensuel (March issue) contains an article on 'La Religion et la Pensée chinoise', the very title of which is characteristic of typical Western confusions. This article appears to have been inspired in great part by the works of Granet, though not by what is best in them, for in any 'abridgement' the documentation is necessarily much reduced, leaving room for interpretations that are questionable at best. It is rather amusing to see traditional knowledge of the most scientific precision treated as 'beliefs', or again to read that 'Chinese wisdom remains foreign to metaphysical preoccupations' because it does not envisage the Cartesian dualism of matter and spirit and does not claim to oppose man to nature! After this, there is scarcely need to say that Taoism is particularly ill-understood in this article, and one can imagine finding all sorts of things here, except the purely metaphysical doctrine which in reality Taoism essentially is...

Études Traditionnelles, 1936, p199.

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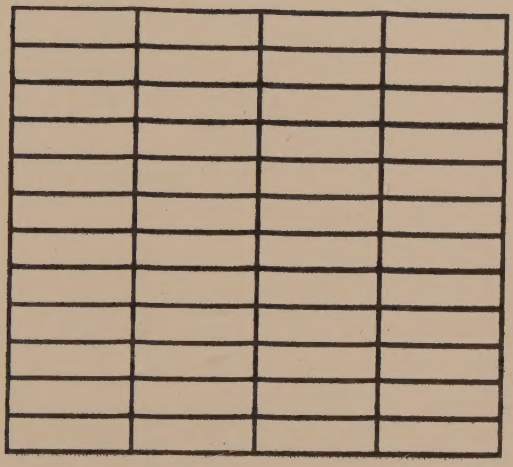

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René Guénon (1886-1951) was one of the great luminaries of the twentieth century, whose critique of the modern world has stood fast against the shifting sands of intellectual fashion. His extensive writings, now finally available in English, are a providential treasure-trove for the modern seeker: while pointing ceaselessly to the perennial wisdom found in past cultures ranging from the Shamanistic to the Indian and Chinese, the Hellenic and Judaic, the Christian and Islamic, and including also Alchemy, Hermeticism, and other esoteric currents, they direct the reader also to the deepest level of religious praxis, emphasizing the need for affiliation with a revealed tradition even while acknowledging the final identity of all spiritual paths as they approach the summit of spiritual realization.

This small volume brings together a number of Guénon's early articles relating to Sufism (*tasawwuf*), or Islamic esoterism. A later article, 'Islamic Esoterism', has also been included, since it articulates so well the particularities of initiation in Islam by defining the fundamental elements of *tasawwuf: shari'ah, tariqah, haqiqah*. The first constitutes the necessary fundamental exoteric basis; the second, the Way and its means; the third, the goal or final result. In the other chapters, Guénon expresses with his usual synthetic clarity what *tawhid* and *faqr* are, and gives examples of traditional sciences, relating angelology to the Arabic alphabet, and chirology to the science of letters (*'ilm al-huruf*). A number of book and article reviews give further insights into Islamic cosmology. Some may feel that the essay 'Taoism and Confucianism' here included has little relevance to Sufism and Islam. However, such writers as Toshihiko Izutsu and Sachiko Murata have drawn many parallels between the two traditions. Confucianism, concentrating on social and interpersonal norms, functions as a kind of *shari'ah* in the context of Chinese religion, while Taoism, like Sufism, is precisely the esoteric Way.

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